CAROLYN WELLS

# SLEEPING DOGS

The murderer struck again to hide a fatal clue!

*Price, net,*
*$2.00*

*No. 79*

**I'VE found that I can always count on Carolyn Wells for a *good* detective story—but this time she's written a *brilliant* one!**

**You'll like Kenneth Carlisle, the former motion picture actor who has gone in for the detection of crime.**

**You'll thrill as you follow him in his tortuous search for the missing clue in the murder of Eileen Abercrombie—a clue so revealing that the murderer strikes again to suppress it!**

**You'll gasp at his ingenious methods and his amazing deductions—you'll find him an invaluable addition to your gallery of detectives.**

Mastermind

**P. S. Remember:**
**CRIME CLUB READERS**
***Never Tell!***

C. P. R.
NEWS DEPT.
$2.00
CALGARY

SLEEPING DOGS

BOOKS BY

CAROLYN WELLS

A BOOK OF CHARADES

CAROLYN WELLS' PUZZLE BOOK

DEEP LAKE MYSTERY

DORIS OF DOBBS FERRY

FAULKNER'S FOLLY

IN THE ONYX LOBBY

SLEEPING DOGS

SUCH NONSENSE

THE AFFAIR AT FLOWER ACRES

THE BOOK OF HUMOROUS VERSE

THE BRIDE OF A MOMENT

THE COMEBACK

THE LUMINOUS FACE

THE MAN WHO FELL THROUGH THE EARTH

THE ROOM WITH THE TASSELS

THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT

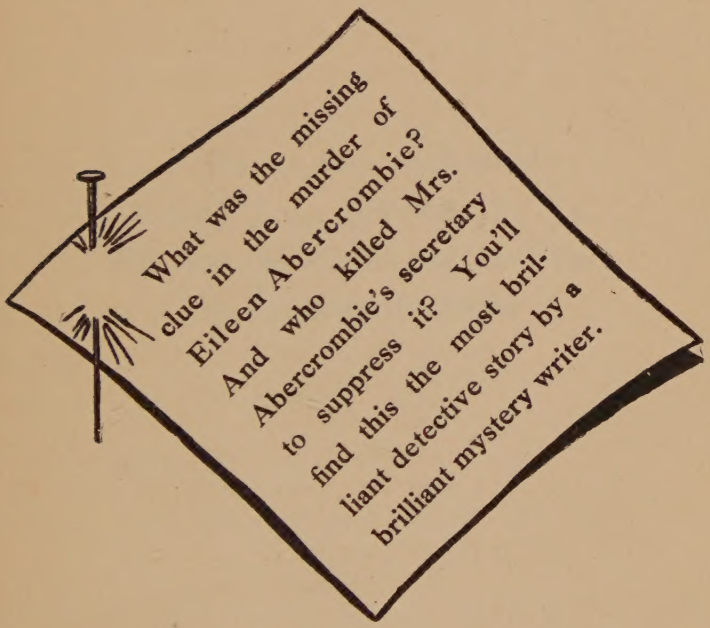
THE VANISHING OF BETTY VARIAN

WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS

# SLEEPING DOGS

BY

CAROLYN WELLS


What was the missing clue in the murder of Eileen Abercrombie? And who killed Mrs. Abercrombie's secretary to suppress it? You'll find this the most brilliant detective story by a brilliant mystery writer.

PUBLISHED FOR

THE CRIME CLUB, INC.

BY DOUBLEDAY, DORAN & COMPANY, INC.

GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK, 1929

COPYRIGHT, 1929
BY CAROLYN WELLS HOUGHTON
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES AT
THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS
GARDEN CITY, N. Y.

FIRST EDITION

To my very good friend
HARRY L. MONROE, JR.
Who has the wisdom and good taste
to like detective stories

## CONTENTS


| CHAPTER | | PAGE |
|---|---|---|
| I. | THE DEATH OF A DARLING | 1 |
| II. | MAISIE, A MODERN MAIDEN | 18 |
| III. | THE RED-HAIRED SECRETARY | 35 |
| IV. | ENTER KENNETH CARLISLE, DETECTIVE | 52 |
| V. | UNDER THE GREENWOOD TREE | 70 |
| VI. | TESTIMONY BUT NO EVIDENCE | 85 |
| VII. | THE WAYS OF WITNESSES | 101 |
| VIII. | PLAYING A MURDER GAME | 118 |
| IX. | AN EXALTED LOVE AFFAIR | 135 |
| X. | THE LOVELINESS OF LORNA | 151 |
| XI. | LET SLEEPING DOGS LIE | 168 |
| XII. | POISON ALL OVER THE PLACE | 184 |
| XIII. | THE MYSTERY OF MAUDE MERCER | 200 |
| XIV. | A NOTE FOUND IN A HAT | 216 |
| XV. | THE FRINGE ON THE SCARF | 232 |
| XVI. | MORE MERCURY | 248 |
| XVII. | THE ABSENCE OF CLUES | 264 |
| XVIII. | KENNETH CARLISLE, DETECTIVE EXTRAORDINARY | 280 |

# SLEEPING DOGS

## CHAPTER I

### *The Death of a Darling*

EILEEN ABERCROMBIE was dead.

The very statement of the fact sounds like a contradiction of terms.

For Eileen Abercrombie was the most alive, alert, and vital woman on earth, and to think of her as dead was too impossible.

Eileen was forty-two, but nobody would ever have believed that. She looked more like thirty-two, but aside from looks, she was the sort of woman who could not be measured by years.

As old as She, as young as Peter Pan, there were far more intriguing mysteries about her than the question of her birth date.

There was, to be sure, a tiny lace network of wrinkles around her big dark eyes, but they disappeared or were forgotten when she smiled.

For Eileen's smile was the kind that bursts suddenly, like a flowering skyrocket, and it filled her eyes with witchery that warmed the cockles of the hearts of all who were near her, and there were always plenty near her.

She was the living embodiment of vitality, vivacity,

vim, verve, and vigour—everything, in fact, that begins with a *v*.

She was vivid, volatile, versatile, and victorious, and she was always ready and eager for anything that promised interest or enjoyment.

She entered a room like an army with banners, but not an aggressive army—rather a joyous, happy army, that one could greet ecstatically, knowing the greeting would be returned in kind.

That was Eileen Abercrombie, and everybody admired, adored, and envied her.

Now, only recently, she had inherited from an aged uncle a goodly sum of money, and though her husband had money aplenty, this new fortune was a godsend to Eileen's daughter.

For Eileen's daughter, Maisie, was not the daughter of Eileen's present husband, but of her former one.

The girl, Maisie, had taken the name of Abercrombie when her mother had, and though far from possessing her mother's charm and delightful personality, she was an attractive girl, of the smart and up-to-date school. Her lipstick and eyebrow pencil were of the finest and used with frequency and efficiency.

Maisie was nobody's fool, and though she couldn't hold a candle to her mother for capability or a sense of relative values, yet she had a lot of common sense and a fine type of worldly wisdom.

Only twenty, she stood, with unreluctant feet and arms outspread, to welcome what she felt sure was to be a long and well-spent life.

Hugh Abercrombie, the husband of Eileen, was, surprisingly, twelve years younger than his wife.

He was one of your reserved, gentle men, who accept all happenings and who would sacrifice personal preferences or even crush down the longings of a tortured heart rather than interfere with the wishes of another.

He had much conscience, more patience, and not an oversupply of humour.

To his wife he was kind and indulgent; to his stepdaughter he was all that a real father could be; and to his friends he was a very prince among men.

His outstanding traits were generosity of thought and unworldliness of mind. Also, though he never obtruded his views or opinions, they were invariably and inevitably right.

But Abercrombie would be the last man in the world to claim this, and so he was not infrequently downed in argument and set aside in a discussion.

Though not at all of the temperament that is called temperamental, he was of a nature so sensitive as to be almost mimosa-like, with the result that his real depths of feeling were quelled and suppressed and his more passionate impulses frozen over with the icy calm he forced himself to present to the world.

And so, when Hugh Abercrombie was told that his wife was dead, he almost gave way to a nervous breakdown.

It was Miss Mercer who brought him the news. Miss Maude Mercer, who was Eileen's social secretary and trusted confidante.

Early in the morning she came to his door, and tapping lightly, soon told him of the shocking discovery of Mrs. Abercrombie dead in her bed.

Hugh had heard her in silence, and had, a little impolitely, shut the door in her face, and then rang for his valet.

He had never liked Miss Mercer, and so he had to shut the door in her face.

He didn't much like his valet, Louis, either, but then there were a lot of people Hugh didn't like. His wife had been one of them.

After Louis had looked after him duly, he sent for Corinne, who was Eileen's maid.

"Tell me about it," he said curtly, and Corinne told him.

"You see," the girl began, "Madame has been out of sorts for a week or more."

"I did not know it," Hugh said.

"No, monsieur; Madame desired nobody should know. She had the trouble of the stomach. She was ill—even sick, but she desired no doctor, no medicine. She was even more sick last night, and though I besought her, no help would she allow to be called. And so she dismissed me, about midnight, and when this morning I went to waken her, she was—ah, poor lady, she no longer lived."

The complete personality of Corinne might be expressed in the one word—trim.

Her uniform was Frenchy and trim; her bobbed black hair was trim; and her every movement and gesture

was clean-cut and correct. Slender and graceful, with slim, black silk-stockinged legs, she was the trim ladies' maid of the theatre and might have just stepped out of an otherwise unimportant second act.

Hugh Abercrombie looked into her eyes, not seeing her trimness.

"What killed her, Corinne?" he said in his gentle voice.

"That I do not know, monsieur. But it was something—not merely an indisposition. There was something *particulier*, yes, even something strange."

"Such as what? Speak out."

"I cannot say, but I suggest, if I may, that you have the doctor come."

"Hasn't she had the doctor?"

"No, she would not. Her own doctor, as you know, is away, and she refused any other."

"Yes, she would. Now, tell me just what you are insinuating."

Abercrombie was getting the better of his nervous breakdown. He usually got the better of things that bothered him, unless, indeed, so doing would bother somebody else. He awaited Corinne's reply.

"Well, monsieur, I will then do so." Corinne looked at him keenly. She was a trim-mannered French girl, but she had a shrewd eye in her head. "I cannot help the feeling that Madame is the victim of a poison."

"Poison! Good Lord, what do you mean?"

"Only that. It may not be, I may make the mistake, but I fear—I fear it is the truth."

"But how—who——" Abercrombie gazed at her. His gray-blue eyes were misty and his brow was furrowed with anxiety.

"Ah, that we do not know," Corinne nodded with understanding. "Yet the symptoms, the effects—I am not a nurse, but I fear—I fear——"

Corinne's eyes dropped and she put on a mysterious air that maddened Abercrombie.

"Get out!" he cried. "Send me back that Mercer woman."

As a matter of fact, Hugh Abercrombie rarely allowed himself to become annoyed, but there was something about the French maid that drove him to desperation.

Her shoulders raised in trim huffiness, Corinne departed and soon Miss Mercer returned.

But she could give no real information. She knew Mrs. Abercrombie was dead, she knew no more.

Now Hugh Abercrombie, for all his gentleness, was by no means a weakling.

He knew he had to take the head of the affair, and he promptly took it.

First, Maisie must be told. Even before a doctor was called, Maisie must be told of her mother's death.

He went to the girl's room and tapped at the door.

"Come in," she called, and Hugh went in.

"Good gosh, Daddy, it's you!"

"Yes, Maisie—there's bad news."

"Mother?" she said as he drew a chair to the bedside and sat down.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Just guessed. What is it? The worst?"

"Yes. But I don't understand. Why do you think so?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'm psychic or something. What, exactly, has happened?"

Hugh told her what had been told him, and the two sat silently staring at each other.

An exquisite bit of humanity, Maisie was.

Had she been on earth at the right time, she might have posed for a Tanagra figurine, so unconsciously lovely were her postures. Her golden-brown hair was of a natural curl and clustered damply round her forehead in babyish ringlets.

Her eyes, amber-coloured, were inscrutable, and she looked at her stepfather with a blank air that annoyed him afresh. Was he to get no sympathy from anyone?

Maisie's pajamas were of all-over lace, cream-coloured, with bands of light blue silk for trimming. Eileen had favoured Oriental types, and Hugh was subconsciously aware that this dainty effect was the prettier.

"Well," he said at last, "you'd better get up and dress. You've a hard day ahead of you."

"You, too, Dad."

"Yes, of course." He rose. "That's a pretty rig-out you've got on, child," he said absently, and she nodded, even more absently.

His subconscious mind was dully wondering what sort of rig-out Lorna Garth wore.

He always meant to curb and train properly his sub-

consciousness, but somehow he never got definitely at it.

He paused at the door, his hand already on the knob.

"Maisie," he said, turning to face her, "your mother couldn't have been—er—poisoned—could she?"

"No," said the girl judicially. "No, I should say not! She's too smart to let anybody put it over her like that."

"I didn't mean—what you mean. I mean—you know—would she take it herself?"

"Hell, no! And she wasn't poisoned, anyway. Acute indigestion, more likely, or something of that sort. I'll be down in a few moments, Dad; don't make a fool of yourself till I get there."

Then Hugh Abercrombie turned his steps toward his wife's bedroom.

Corinne seemed to be in charge, with Miss Mercer in the boudoir adjoining.

"Have you called the doctor?" he asked, and Miss Mercer replied.

"Yes, I called. And Dr. Garth is home again. He arrived last night. He will be right over."

Abercrombie turned to the still figure on the bed.

Heedful of cautions from Miss Mercer, Corinne had touched nothing, though her fingers fairly itched to straighten the pillows and tidy up the coverlets.

But the bed showed no real disorder.

Eileen lay as if asleep, with no visible sign of pain or suffering.

Her hair, shingled at the back, was in soft, thick

masses round her face. One heavy obstreperous lock, ever falling into her eyes, was thrust back as if impatiently pushed off her brow. The morning sunshine sent gold lights through the dark bronze tresses, and the long curving lashes hid the eyes that would never smile again.

The pitiless sunshine betrayed the few timid ravages that Time had dared to make, but the clear fine skin and the exquisitely carved features braved triumphantly the light of day.

Moving slowly, Hugh approached the bed and sat down on the edge of it.

"Don't touch her," Miss Mercer said impulsively, but received in response such a gaze of mingled reproach and reproof that no further suggestions were made.

Motionless the husband sat, staring at his wife as at some inexplicable mystery, and then the doctor arrived.

Garth, the family physician for many years, was a handsome man, with gray hair and a gray Vandyke beard. He had an air of competent authority, and dismissed Hugh from the room by the simple method of taking him by the arm and leading him to the door.

He looked carefully at the dead woman, and then ordered Miss Mercer and Corinne to leave the room also.

Expeditiously and with great care the doctor made his examination and investigation.

The latter included a thorough search in the bathroom which opened off the bedroom.

In the usual medicine cabinet Dr. Garth found a fairly large collection of creams, lotions, and tablets, as well as many bottles whose labels bore the marks of his own prescriptions.

Scanning the lot quickly but systematically, he picked out a small box of prepared powders, a little bottle of dark liquid, and another small vial whose label was so old as to be almost illegible.

These things he put in his pocket and then opened the door to the hall.

"Where is Mr. Abercrombie?" he said to Corinne, who was hovering there.

"He went downstairs, Doctor," she informed him. "Perhaps in the dining room, at his breakfast, you will find him. Me, shall I now straighten the room?"

"No, touch nothing. Nothing, do you hear?"

Corinne heard perfectly, but it was the stern expression on the doctor's face that made her decide in favour of strict obedience.

She had no desire to do anything wrong, not she.

Garth went on downstairs and found Abercrombie in the breakfast room, where Maisie had persuaded him to go by saying that otherwise she would take no breakfast herself.

The beautiful little room, an octagon extension from the main dining room, overlooked the water across a stretch of lawn and a few flower beds.

The house, Graysands, was on one of the small bays on the north shore of Long Island. Planned by a master architect, it was an echo of Old France, but so well

adapted to its environs that it seemed neither anomalous nor incongruous.

A great tower and a somewhat church-like structure composed the main part, while from either side rambled a walled and turreted pile that was as picturesque as it was available for comfort.

Abercrombie loved it and hastened through his work, on the days he spent in New York, to get back as soon as possible to Graysands and its delights.

On an eminence, it overlooked the Sound, and its harmonious though irregular outline could be seen from the far distance.

Near-by lawns surrounded the house and faded off to wilder bits of wood and copse, and thence down to the water.

The breakfast room, Eileen had ordained, should be in orange and pale green, and with its painted furniture and harmonious appointments it was an attractive place to begin the day.

Dr. Garth entered, and in silence took one of the empty chairs at the table. He accepted a cup of coffee and tasted it before speaking.

Then, looking round at the others, he began to talk.

"I think there is no occasion for secrecy," he said. "Mrs. Abercrombie came to her death by poison. As you all know, I have been her physician for several years, and so am familiar with her constitution and physical condition. She died, I am convinced beyond all doubt, from the effects of the irritant poison bichloride of mercury."

There were four at the table besides the speaker: Abercrombie, Maisie, Miss Mercer, and a guest named Murgatroyd Loring.

All four looked at him without a word.

Hugh Abercrombie's face showed no translatable expression of any sort.

Maisie, her spoonful of melon arrested halfway to her mouth, sat as if paralyzed, her eyes big with horror and her delicately rouged lips parted, as if benumbed by stark amazement.

Miss Mercer, as befitted her position, made no outward sign of concern, but her blue eyes travelled slowly from one face to another, and her delicate, fair skin seemed to glow a little pinker, as if from the will power she exerted to keep silent.

"Who gave her bichloride of mercury?" asked Hugh, his usually soft voice harsh with accusation.

"We do not know that anyone gave it to her," Garth returned. "It may be that she took it herself, by accident, let us say——"

"Let us say nothing, except what we know or believe to be the truth." Hugh looked stern. "Eileen was not the sort to take poison by accident."

"Nobody is the sort to take poison by accident," was the doctor's curt rejoinder. "There is no such sort or class of people. Yet the accident happens."

"But how could it?" pursued Hugh. "Where would the—stuff come from? How could she get it?"

"Those things are not questions for us, but for the—the authorities."

"The police!" said Maisie in a low, horrified whisper. "Ooooh!"

She swayed in her chair, and Loring, who sat next her, put an arm round her for support.

"Don't be silly!" cried the girl. "I'm not going to faint. But to think of Mother poisoning herself! Wow! Can you breathe in the same room with it? I say, Dr. Garth, do something—get busy! What do you say, Dad?"

"I say, dear, that I'd like you to go to your room for a while. Let Corinne look after you. We others will settle on what's to be done, and I'll tell you all about it later."

"No, Dad, I'll do nothing of the sort."

"Then you'll keep quiet, Miss," Dr. Garth said, turning his severe gaze on her. "Mind, now, either be still or leave the room."

Maisie had been up against the doctor's commands before, and she knew his way of carrying out his threats, so she subsided and waited the next move from the others.

"You see," the doctor went on, addressing himself to Abercrombie, "I cannot give a certificate as the matter stands. It has to be reported and the coroner will advise us if an inquest is necessary."

"Aren't you forging ahead rather fast, Doctor?" asked Loring.

Murgatroyd Loring, or, as he was always called, Troy Loring, was a cousin of Mrs. Abercrombie's first husband, and had, for some years, been her lawyer. He

spent much of his time at Graysands, and though no favourite of Hugh's was always made welcome and given the run of the place.

He was an able business man, and kept Eileen's financial affairs in good shape. His principal claim to obnoxiousness lay in the fact that he wanted to manage everything, and had an overweening sense of his own capability for doing so.

It must be admitted that he was capable, but that didn't offset his annoying insistence. His unasked advice and unwanted help so irritated Hugh Abercrombie that time and again he had begged Eileen to forbid the man the house.

To this she gave a laughing reply which however gently it was worded carried no hope of consent to his request, and Loring continued to make his home at Graysands whenever he felt it convenient for himself.

And now he was querying Dr. Garth's dictum regarding the case of poor dead Eileen.

Abercrombie's face darkened, as was its habit when he was annoyed, and he was about to tell Loring flatly that he was beyond his rights when he censured the doctor. But a sudden thought came to him that now that Eileen was gone he could himself forbid Troy Loring to come to his house. So poignantly did this idea strike him that he realized it was a base thought, and he knew that nothing would induce him to turn the circumstance of Eileen's death to his own petty and personal advantage.

"Speak up, Hugh," Troy said, looking at him closely.

"I saw you start to say something and then subside. Go ahead. Tell Dr. Garth that we, the family, will decide if and when to call the police."

"I cannot agree, Troy, that you are one of the family," Hugh said, his tones icy. "Nor can I do otherwise than to accept Dr. Garth's suggestion or, rather, his implied suggestion, that the coroner be notified of the matter. Will you see to it, Doctor?"

"Yes," and the medical man looked grave. "Don't be foolish, Mr. Loring, this is the only possible procedure. I will call Garrett now."

He left the table, and going out to the hall sought a telephone.

Loring, looking injured, said petulantly:

"I do wish, my dear Hugh, that you had a little more backbone."

"Sorry I can't accommodate you, Troy. But the situation is too serious to talk lightly. I wish I knew a little more about Mrs. Abercrombie's illness. Miss Mercer, can you tell me just how long she had been feeling indisposed?"

"No, sir," and Miss Mercer patted her smooth and sleek red hair, brushing back its already immaculate sheen.

It was plain to be seen that left to itself her hair would curl, but apparently she did not desire it to, for she was eternally smoothing it back. A good-looking face was Miss Mercer's—regular, well-cut features and a little air of disdain that sat well on her. The bluest of blue eyes and a rather large but finely shaped mouth above

a chin that bespoke determination and indomitable perseverance.

"I know only what I chanced to observe," Miss Mercer resumed, seeming to feel that she had been unnecessarily curt. "Mrs. Abercrombie had planned some work for me to do last Friday morning. But when the time came, she said she was not feeling well and the work must be postponed. It has never been taken up, for each day, after the mail was attended to, Mrs. Abercrombie felt too ill to do more."

"But why wasn't I told? Why didn't I know of this?" said Abercrombie, looking surprised.

"Are you sure you didn't?" put in Troy Loring with a quizzical smile.

"Just what do you mean by that?" returned Hugh quietly, but with a steady gaze at the speaker.

"Nothing much. Only if your wife was so ill that she had to put off her social secretary for two or three days, it would seem she was ill enough to attract your attention."

"Yes, it would seem so," and Hugh continued to look at him.

"Unless, that is, your attention was centred elsewhere," Loring went on.

Miss Mercer caught her breath at this, and Maisie, rising, went round and took a seat at her father's side.

But Hugh Abercrombie only said, with a calm face and in even tones, "Yes, unless my attention was centred elsewhere."

But he continued to look at Loring, and at last Troy's

eyes fell and he turned to Miss Mercer, saying, "Do ring for some hot coffee. Maisie has deserted her post at the head of the table."

And then Dr. Garth came back.

"The coroner will arrive soon," he said in a strained sort of voice. "And headquarters is sending men. I think I need not tell you that the line of least resistance will be best for all concerned. Nothing must be touched in any of the rooms used by Mrs. Abercrombie. For the rest, merely answer their questions and follow their directions. I trust it can be adjudged an accident, and that a half hour will see it all finished."

"You'll stay here, Garth?" asked Abercrombie.

"I can't very well, as I have a serious consultation on. But they know where to find me and probably they won't need me at present. I'll look in here as soon as I am at leisure."

## CHAPTER II

### *Maisie, a Modern Maiden*

THE police were at Graysands.

Their advent seemed like a general uprising, but when they were sorted out it seemed that three were reporters, one was Percy Van Antwerp, come to see Maisie, one was an emissary from the doctor's office, with a note, and there were but three men from headquarters.

As they mounted the steps to the great front verandah, Sergeant Downing in the lead, they were met by Loring, who received them with a quiet dignity.

"You are in charge here?" Downing asked, looking inquiringly at him.

Though a trifle below average height, Loring had an air of importance that commanded deference. He was a compact man, about thirty, with a round bullet head, black hair and moustache, and sharp black eyes.

His manner betokened a complete comprehension and his countenance and way of speaking always implied that but few words were necessary when giving him information.

"Yes," he said, "in general, that is, I am Murgatroyd Loring, and I am the personal lawyer of the late Mrs. Abercrombie."

"The family lawyer, I suppose?" said the sergeant.

"I said personal lawyer," Loring corrected. "I am in charge of Mrs. Abercrombie's estate. Shall I give you the details of the situation?"

"All in good time," said Downing suavely. "Where is Mr. Abercrombie?"

"I hope he needn't be disturbed with the beginnings of your inquiry. Let me give you the main facts."

"What are the main facts?"

"That Mrs. Abercrombie is dead, and that she died from poisoning."

"We know that already; the doctor told us. Who killed her?"

"There is no reason, as yet, to assume that anybody killed her. That is why I don't want you to talk to Mr. Abercrombie. Your methods are so brutal, and he is a sensitive man."

"Well, I think I'll go inside, but I must use my own judgment as to my methods. And I must insist upon seeing both Mr. Abercrombie and his daughter, and later, all the rest of the household."

And so thoroughly did Sergeant Downing understand his business and how to conduct it that in a short time he had all the principal members of the household before him and the servants hovering in the hall.

He had chosen a small reception room for his use, and he set to work systematically.

"Your wife has been ill?" he asked of Hugh Abercrombie, a note of sympathy in his gruff voice, perhaps because of what Loring had told him.

"Yes," was the reply, spoken hesitantly and in a low tone. "That is, she wasn't very well for the past week or so."

"What was the nature of her trouble?"

"Why—I don't know exactly—nothing serious, I understand."

"You understand? Don't you know of your own knowledge what ailed your wife?"

"No," and Abercrombie met his questioner's eyes squarely, but his whole frame seemed to shrink as the small inquisitive eyes of the sergeant bored into his own.

"Does anybody know?" Downing said, casting a glance round the room.

"I do," Maisie said. "My mother had chronic indigestion; she had it a long time. It bothered her a lot of late."

"Did Dr. Garth attend her for it?" snapped the questioner.

"Sometimes," Maisie replied. "Sometimes she just took the medicine he prescribed. She always had it on hand."

"We will leave those matters until Dr. Garth returns," Downing said. "He will be here soon. Who discovered that the lady was dead?"

"Her maid," said Maisie, "when she went to her room this morning."

Seemingly impressed by the seriousness of the situation, Maisie had laid aside her pert gayety of manner with her bright-coloured sports suit; wearing a plain little black frock, she was polite though a trifle haughty in her manner toward the detective.

She sat between Hugh Abercrombie and Percy Van Antwerp, the man who had come quickly over to see her as soon as he heard of the tragedy.

For the news had already spread through the small town of Crescent Cove, and Van Antwerp was a privileged friend of the family and especially of Maisie.

A man of about forty, tall and very slim, with thick light hair and light blue eyes, he was so elegant of manner and speech that Maisie took delight in calling him the perfect Percy.

Nor was the term inapt, for his fastidious tastes, his dislike for anything sordid or commonplace, and his carefully correct manners were quite in line with the traits custom has ascribed to the Percys and Clarences of all time.

He was one of Maisie's suitors, but as their name was legion and he had no especial claim to supremacy, he was looked upon as a harmless, necessary visitor, and came and went as he chose, having his present quarters at the Abercrombie Arms.

He watched Maisie closely, a little afraid of what she might say, for her chatter was an uncertain quantity and not always along the lines of strictest veracity.

But he was glad to note her subdued air and her quiet reserve as she bore the brunt of the inquiry.

Corinne was summoned, and her manner was in decided contrast to Maisie's.

The volubility of the French maid was evident from the outset, and Downing willingly gave her free rein, hoping to get some grains of wheat from her chaff of talk.

The gist of her story was that she had left Mrs. Abercrombie at midnight or a bit later, not feeling well, but assuredly not ill. Often had she been in far more discomfort than that, and a night's rest had set all right.

"She told you to leave her?"

"But of course. She had her medicine, her hot-water bottle, her book to read, her reading glasses, all was in order. She bade me good-night and said she would be all right in the morning."

"And in the morning?"

Corinne's voice lowered its key. Her sense of the dramatic came to the front and she whispered:

"*Hélas!* In the morning the dear lady was no more. I entered the room as always. Quiet she lay, fair, sweet, like an angel. But not breathing. I gazed, distracted—tempest-tossed—I knew not what to do."

"Well, what did you do?"

Corinne looked at the stolid sergeant reproachfully, as at one who had placed a material finger on a bubble of imagination.

"I went and told Miss Mercer," she said, a little sulkily, as if aware her bit of the limelight was over.

"And who is Miss Mercer?"

"I am Miss Mercer," said the social secretary, speaking as if unwillingly.

Downing was suddenly impressed by the fact that all except Corinne were quite evidently unwilling to talk.

"You were Mrs. Abercrombie's secretary?"

"Yes."

"What were your duties?"

"To take care of her correspondence—answering letters, sending invitations, and such matters. Sometimes I read to her or went on errands for her. I did whatever she asked of me."

"You were in no sense a nurse to her?"

A strange look crossed Miss Mercer's face, and she dropped her eyes.

"No," she said decidedly, "she never asked any services of me outside the usual duties of a secretary."

"When did you last see her alive?"

"Yesterday afternoon, about five o'clock."

"You were with her then?"

"Only for a short time. A house party had been planned for next week, but Mrs. Abercrombie told me she had decided to postpone it until she felt better."

"What did she tell you ailed her?"

"Nothing definite. Only in a general way she complained of indigestion and said she knew she ought to give up certain rich foods which brought it on."

"She had medicine for this complaint?"

"Yes, which she took at stated intervals."

"Here is Dr. Garth now," the sergeant said in a tone of relief. "Now we can get our evidence in some sort of order."

The doctor came into the room, his fine face looking grave and perturbed.

He sat down near Hugh Abercrombie and Maisie, gave a nod to Percy Van Antwerp, and turned his attention to the sergeant.

"Please state the physical condition in general of your late patient, Mrs. Abercrombie."

"She was, so far as I know or have any reason to believe, in fairly good health. She was subject to attacks of indigestion, but they were not serious and came invariably from overeating, not from any organic disturbance."

"Yet she died from poisoning?"

"That I cannot attest, as there has been no autopsy as yet. But the visible symptoms pointed unmistakably, in my opinion, to the administration of bichloride of mercury, a deadly poison."

"That makes it a case for the coroner, and he has been summoned. My business is to learn details of circumstances and conditions connected with the lady's death. You are certain, Doctor, that it could not have been caused by a sudden attack of acute indigestion?"

"I am certain of that. The positive effects of the poison are quite plain aside from what the post mortem may disclose."

"To your knowledge, had Mrs. Abercrombie any of that poison in her possession?"

There was a pause before the doctor said, "No, she had not, to my knowledge."

"Why did you hesitate to answer?"

"Only to feel sure I was stating the truth."

"Had she ever had any that you know of?"

"She had not. It is not a drug that is easy to come by, nor is it one that anybody is likely to have."

"Will you tell us of the nature and properties of the poison in question?"

"It is difficult to do so, but I will try. Bichloride of mercury or corrosive sublimate is oftenest seen in the form of granules or powder. It has a decided coppery or metallic taste, so strong that it would be a hard matter to administer it without the victim's knowledge."

"Dr. Garth, you are assuming that it was administered. Could not Mrs. Abercrombie have procured and taken the dose of her own volition?"

Garth threw back his head and squared his shoulders in obvious indignation.

Then after an instant's glare at the detective he reassumed his previous official manner.

"Of course," he agreed, "that is quite possible. But knowing Mrs. Abercrombie as I do—as I did, I cannot reconcile such a proceeding with her nature and habits."

"Leaving the question for the moment, please state how much of the poison constitutes a fatal dose."

"That is an unanswerable question. Three grains has been known to be fatal, and from three to five grains

may perhaps be stated as the average dose necessary to destroy life. But records prove recovery has taken place after fifty grains were swallowed. Also, death has sometimes occurred within half an hour, while in other instances life has been maintained for several days—recorded instances showing ten or even twelve days. The average duration of fatal cases is from two to six days."

"Then the poison may have been swallowed by Mrs. Abercrombie at any time within the past six or more days?"

"That is so."

"Must it necessarily have been all in one dose?"

"By no means. It may have been in several doses, or possibly all at once."

"That makes very difficult the task of learning how or by whom the poison was given."

This, not being a question, received no response from Dr. Garth.

"What are the ante-mortem symptoms of this poison?"

"An acrid, coppery taste in the mouth and a sense of constriction and burning heat in the throat and stomach. There is nausea and dyspnea."

"What is the meaning of that last word you used?"

"Dyspnea? Shortness of breath. Then, the countenance may become flushed and swollen, or it may be pallid and drawn. There may or may not be pain. Death is at last brought about by collapse, coma, or convulsions."

"Which of these best fits the present case?"

"I should say coma, for there is no sign of convulsions, nor of severe collapse. A more detailed statement could be given to a professional man, but that describes the matter to a layman."

"And very clearly. After the arrival of the coroner, and the autopsy, there will doubtless be an inquest, when the subject will be again taken up."

Nearly everyone present gave a slight sigh of relief, thinking the present session was practically over.

But any such hopes were dashed when the sergeant resumed speech.

"We cannot judge," he began, "whether the poison that Mrs. Abercrombie received into her system was taken of her own will or was administered by another. In either case, it may have been by accident or mistake or it may have been on purpose. However that may be, it is my immediate duty to learn all I can of the circumstances of the past few days."

"Nonsense, man," came in a clear, ringing voice from Maisie. "You make a noise like somebody investigating a murder mystery, if I know what you mean! My mother wasn't murdered! Put that in a pasteboard container and take it home! My mother took that stuff by accident. There's no law against that, and we've trouble enough here without your trying to turn things into a cobweb party. Get your facts if you want to—I'll tell you how old we all are—but don't try to put on a Great Sleuth act, you old Cottage Pudding!"

The lightning changes that crossed Downing's face

were comical, or would have seemed so had the occasion been less grave.

He looked amazed then stunned, angry then amused, and as she reached her peroration his really intelligent face showed only a deep and absorbing interest.

"Very well, Miss Abercrombie," he said as calmly as if she had said nothing unusual. "I'll be glad of some facts from you. When did you first hear of your mother having an attack of illness?"

Maisie looked disappointed, as if her firing had missed its mark, but it was not her way to acknowledge defeat and she answered promptly and straightforwardly.

"Last Thursday night. We had had a sort of tea party in a mild way. I wanted a water gymkhana, but Mother stood out for a plain tea in the new Japanese tea house. So we had it, and lots of people came to it. Well, she didn't come to dinner that night—sent word she'd have a tray in her room. I didn't think much about it—she often cuts up that trick—but when I dropped into her room a minute in the evening she looked mighty peaked."

"Ill?"

"Sorta. More washed out and done up. That's not like Mother, you know. She's usually fit as a fiddle, even when she's just had an indigestion attack."

"A different sort of illness, was it?"

"That's what I'm telling you, man. She seemed down and out, and never before in my whole life have I ever seen my mother down and out."

"Did she repeat that experience?"

"Well, no." Maisie looked thoughtful. "But she was ailing a little Friday and Saturday, and on Sunday she cut out a party that I know she wanted awfully to go to."

"She felt too ill to go?"

But Maisie's mercurial temperament had whirled in a new direction.

With no apparent reason, she ceased to be communicative, ceased to be willing to detail the doings of her mother or the particulars of her illness. She shut up like a stubborn clam, and merely shook or nodded her head in answer to the sergeant's inquiries.

Like a wise man Downing forbore to question her further, and with a sigh at the contrariness of womankind he turned to Hugh Abercrombie for further information.

Abercrombie sat somewhat stiffly in a straight-backed chair. His chestnut-brown hair, which he wore brushed straight back, was soft and fine, the hair of culture and delicacy. His blue-gray eyes were steady and alertly attentive. But his face was pale, and a close observer could have noticed that the nostrils of his straight, well-shaped nose quivered slightly.

With no suggestion of embarrassment or even self-consciousness he gave an impression of being at bay and showed clearly his disinclination to being questioned.

Noticing this, Sergeant Downing decided to grill him.

"Mr. Abercrombie," he began, "have you any reason to believe that your wife would have taken poison of her own volition?"

"Most assuredly not," was the reply, spoken decidedly but in a halting tone, as if the speaker found the situation intolerable.

"Have you any reason to think anyone would have given it to her with a wrong motive?"

"No, indeed! Who could wish her harm? And, moreover, how could such a deed be accomplished?"

"I will do the questioning, if you please. What, then, is your theory of the means that brought about Mrs. Abercrombie's death?"

"That it was a horrible accident or mistake of some sort. The details I am not able even to guess at, but it is a certainty that the administration of the poison was unintentional."

"You can think of no one who could for any reason desire the lady's death?"

"Positively not. She was a universal favourite. She had not an enemy in the world. All who knew her loved and admired her. Foul play is absolutely out of the question."

Downing looked at him, not quizzically, but with a judicial air, as if weighing these statements.

"She was then a paragon among women?"

"She was, indeed, as can be testified by anyone who had the honour of her acquaintance. May I ask you to confine your queries to the subject in hand, and which need not include a discussion of the lady's character?"

One of Downing's chief merits was his inviolable rule never to let himself show annoyance at any aspersion of his methods.

Without so much as raising an eyebrow he went on equably:

"I am told Mrs. Abercrombie first showed symptoms of illness on Thursday afternoon. Did you know of that?"

"I knew she was not at dinner that night. But I assumed she was wearied with the entertainment of the afternoon and preferred to dine in her room."

"Did you not see her that evening?"

"No."

"Nor the next day?"

"The next day, Friday, she joined us in the afternoon as usual, and said she was feeling better."

"Did she look or seem ill at that time?"

"No, I think not."

"Indeed, she didn't!" Maisie broke in irrepressibly. "She looked beautiful! I never saw her more stunning! She was tired out by the tea, but the next day she was rested and was all whoopee!"

"At this tea entertainment, what did Mrs. Abercrombie eat? Is it known?"

Downing looked inquiringly at the maid and the secretary, but it was Maisie who answered.

"Oh, Eileen never ate anything at a party."

"You are speaking of your mother?"

"Sure. But I didn't call her Mother 'cause it made her seem so old. You see, she was older than I am, but

she seemed younger, or just about the same. She was a dead-game sport and an all-round brick. All the B. V. D. sex fell for her. In fact, she had us all under her thumb. Or all except me."

Downing refused to be shocked by this ebullition.

"And she ate nothing at the tea party that could make her ill?"

"Nixy. I asked her to have a sandwich but she only shook her head. Last I saw of her she was putting away a highball."

"Ah, and who gave it to her?"

Maisie stared.

"I dunno. Guess she helped herself. But there was no poison around to put in it, if that's what you're getting at!"

"Was Mrs. Abercrombie in the habit of drinking spirits?"

"About like the rest of us," said Maisie pertly.

"She was not," intervened Dr. Garth with a glance of reproof at the girl. "As her physician, I can state that alcoholic drinks were forbidden her, and I daresay the highball in question was a mere glass of carbonated water."

"Maybe," Maisie said; "she was showing off those new silver highball glasses she just bought, so I couldn't say."

"Where was this entertainment held?"

"In the Japanese tea house, but of course the guests were all over the place."

"You were present at the festivities, Mr. Abercrombie?"

"I was about the grounds most of the time, yes."

"Did you notice Mrs. Abercrombie eating or drinking anything?"

"I did not, but I was not in the tea house, where the tea was served."

"Why not? Had you no duties as host?"

"Oh, no, it was an informal affair. My wife and a bevy of other ladies did the honours."

"Your wife was what may be called a strong character, was she not?"

Hugh Abercrombie looked at his questioner.

"She was," he answered slowly. "A fine, strong, and altogether admirable character. I have never known a more magnificent specimen of womanhood."

The statement was made in a calm, gentle voice, and had no effect of blatant flattery. Rather, it seemed the voluntary tribute of one who thoroughly meant just what he said.

"Not one, then, who for any reason would take her own life?"

"I have already answered that, but I will repeat that in my opinion it would be an act entirely incompatible with her whole nature."

"Was the lady entirely well of her indisposition the next day, Friday?"

"So far as I know," Hugh replied.

"Did she dine with the family that evening?"

"I don't recall," he began, but Maisie interrupted.

"'Course you don't, Dad, you weren't there yourself. No, Eileen didn't come to the table Friday night. I had a few of my boy friends to dinner, and a couple of girls. You remember, Miss Mercer?"

"Yes," said Miss Mercer without a smile.

Clairvoyance was not required to perceive that the secretary did not entirely approve of the daughter of the house.

"Well, that's the way it was. I was an orphan child at dinner Friday night."

"And Saturday? And Sunday?"

"Lemme see. Saturday night I was out to dinner myself. Sunday night, we had some guests in. Oh, yes, I remember. Eileen came to the table, but she left before we had finished. Had one of her attacks. Then, Monday night, she had her dinner in bed, and—and it was Monday night she died."

Maisie broke down and, turning to Abercrombie, laid her head on his shoulder and gave way to half-suppressed sobs of grief.

Gently he put an arm round her and stroked her temple with a slow, soothing gesture.

Percy Van Antwerp rose and came to them saying, "Come, Maisie, for a little stroll in the fresh air." And the two went away together.

## CHAPTER III

### *The Red-Haired Secretary*

SERGEANT DOWNING turned his attention to the secretary.

"As one who is not a member of the family, I wish to ask you, Miss Mercer, if you know of any episode or occurrence that may have made Mrs. Abercrombie despondent or desperate?"

"You mean a quarrel with someone?"

"Not necessarily that, but had anything happened to disturb her of late?"

"Mrs. Abercrombie was not in the habit of making me her confidante. I know of nothing that might have disturbed her."

Downing moved about impatiently. He felt that he had a hard row to hoe. Nobody seemed inclined to help him investigate this case, and that of itself struck him as suspicious.

He grew a little more definite.

"Please understand, Miss Mercer, that I am endeavouring to get at the salient points of this affair. The circumstances seem to indicate a mysterious death, and it is my duty to inquire into details. As secretary, you were cognizant of all Mrs. Abercrombie's corre-

spondence, and I ask you if you have written for her any letter that might indicate anger in her heart toward anyone or if, to your knowledge, she has received any letters that might be called unpleasant or threatening."

Miss Mercer sat for a moment looking steadily at him. Her big blue eyes were unwavering and her fair pale face gave no hint of embarrassment. With a gesture that was habitual with her she smoothed back her rebellious red hair and squared her strong-looking shoulders.

She was wearing a simple house dress of black-and-white silky material, and her rather large hands were crossed idly on her lap.

"No," she said at last, "no, I cannot help you. I never read the personal letters that came to Mrs. Abercrombie, unless, that is, she wanted me to answer them. And I never saw any that could by any possibility be called threatening."

She pronounced the last word with a decided note of reproach, as if it was utterly beyond contingency.

"Perhaps not quite that, but was there none that could cause her bother or worry?"

"Not to the extent of seeking relief in suicide. Like everyone else, Mrs. Abercrombie had problems that required thought and judgment, but she was more than capable of wrestling with such problems."

Downing sighed. This secretary person seemed hopeless. Were they all in league to prevent his learning anything helpful?

He demanded the presence of the principal servants.

Fetter, the butler, looked like one of the graven images that the Second Commandment forbids us to worship. He had acquired this demeanour by long and careful practice and was justly proud of it.

"Who prepared the meals that were taken to Mrs. Abercrombie's room?" the sergeant flung at him, plunging at once, he hoped, into the heart of the mystery.

"The cook, under my superintendence, sir," Fetter replied, his calm quite equalling that of the secretary or the master himself.

"You would have known, then, if any injurious element had been added to the dishes?"

"There was no opportunity for such a thing." Fetter's big bishop-like face indicated horror, but his tone was decided.

"Who carried the trays to the lady?"

"Often I did, myself, or, if I had other duties, I sent James, the second man."

"And who received them?"

"Corinne, the maid."

Corinne, being recalled, declared no deleterious substance could by any chance have got into the food, and indeed it did seem impossible, unless the servants were guilty, and there was no reason to surmise that.

The coroner arrived at this point, and Downing willingly took a back seat, prepared to listen while Dr. Garrett did some questioning.

Coroner Garrett was a gaunt, lantern-jawed man who

shambled physically but whose mentality was alive and alert.

He began with Abercrombie, and spoke his questions with curt dispatch.

"When did you last see your wife alive, Mr. Abercrombie?" he shot at Hugh, a latent accusation in his tone.

"Monday, that is yesterday afternoon."

"Where?"

"In her boudoir. She was somewhat indisposed, but nothing to make me feel alarmed for her. We chatted for a while, and I asked her if she would be able to dine with us. She said she thought not as she was suffering from a disordered stomach."

"Did she mention any definite symptoms?"

"She spoke of intermittent pain in the abdomen, but said she was free from it at the moment. When I left her she was comfortable enough. But she sent word later she would dine in her room, and I didn't see her again."

"You didn't go to her room?"

"I went to the door directly after dinner, but Corinne said she was resting, so I didn't disturb her."

Garrett looked closely at the speaker. He was an astute reader of character, and he wondered just how regretful Hugh Abercrombie was at his wife's death.

Deciding on a bold stroke, he said sharply:

"Were you and your wife on good terms?"

Hugh jerked up his head as if at a spear thrust. His eyes blazed for an instant and then, as suddenly, his

icy calm returned to him, and he relaxed his grip on the chair arms as he replied:

"Perfectly so. We have been married ten years and have never had an unpleasant word between us on any subject."

"That is a record. You are acquainted with all of your wife's friends?"

"I think so. Some perhaps only slightly, but I do not think she had any friends entirely unknown to me."

"Then you can think of no one who would have intentionally brought about or connived at her death?"

"Most assuredly not. I cannot believe it was the work of an enemy. I am sure the poison was taken into her system through some mistake."

"You are also sure Mrs. Abercrombie had no reason for taking her own life?"

"I am positive of that. My wife was an exceptionally fine character, and among her traits were extraordinary courage and bravery. Had she had grave trouble she would have met it victoriously; she would never have chosen the coward's way out."

"You did not, then, enter Mrs. Abercrombie's bedroom after leaving her on Monday afternoon?"

"I did not."

"What were your movements?"

Hugh Abercrombie paused in thought. He looked no whit embarrassed; he seemed only anxious to command his memory.

"After leaving my wife," he said, "I thought something of going for a round of golf. But the afternoon

was well along, so I merely took a stroll round my own gardens and returned to the house."

"Did you meet anyone on your stroll?"

"No, except one or two of the gardeners or their workmen."

"Did you stop anywhere?"

"I went in for a few moments to the Japanese tea house. It is a cool and pleasant place, and I remained perhaps a half hour or so."

"There was no one there with you?"

An almost imperceptible pause delayed the answer. Then it came clearly and without hesitation:

"No, I was alone."

"Then you came back to the house?"

"Yes." Hugh showed no resentment at this catechism. "I sat on the porch for a time—there were several people present—and then I went to my room, dressed, went to dinner, and spent the evening in my library."

"And retired, when?"

"Early. About ten, I think, though I didn't notice exactly."

"You didn't go again to inquire after Mrs. Abercrombie's health?"

"I have told you I did not. I had no idea she was seriously ill."

Garrett was about to say something further when a newcomer walked into the room.

This was Eric Redmayne, partner and long-time friend of Abercrombie.

Hugh's eyes showed a gleam of pleasure at seeing him, and he beckoned him to a seat at his side.

Redmayne was a tall, slim chap, with the air of an athlete. A mane of fair hair and a pair of smiling gray eyes gave him a decided charm and he gave Hugh a warm handclasp as he sat down beside him.

Words were unnecessary between these two understanding friends, and Redmayne turned his attention to the coroner.

Garrett was suddenly struck with the idea that this might be an opportunity to get some disinterested information.

"Your name, sir?" he said curtly.

"Eric Redmayne," with a disarming smile. "I am the business partner of Mr. Abercrombie; we are a firm of stock brokers in New York City."

"Yes, yes. And you were acquainted with the late Mrs. Abercrombie?"

"Oh, yes, we have long been friends."

"Just so, just so. Now, Mr. Redmayne, what sort of woman was she?"

"The finest type possible, in every particular. As an American woman, wife, and mother, Mrs. Abercrombie was just about one hundred per cent. perfect."

"You are enthusiastic."

"No more so than the subject calls for. And no more so than her hundreds of friends would echo."

The vitality and energy of Redmayne impressed all present.

Even Troy Loring lost his sulky look and seemed to thaw under this radiant goodwill.

The imperturbable secretary gazed at him with open curiosity, for they had never met, and Miss Mercer quickly sensed his powerful personality.

"In your judgment, Mr. Redmayne, was Mrs. Abercrombie a woman likely to take her own life—given sufficient reason?"

"I cannot conceive of sufficient reason for anyone taking his or her own life," was the grave response. "But Mrs. Abercrombie would be the last one I should think of in such a connection."

"What, then, can you suggest, was the reason for her being poisoned?"

Redmayne looked thoughtful.

"Remember," he said slowly, "I have just come here. I have heard only the barest facts of the matter. I am scarcely the one to express an opinion, but if I am to answer your question I can only say that I can think of no explanation but that it was an accident. I suppose you have thoroughly investigated the possibilities of that."

"To the extent of feeling certain that there is no scrap of evidence for an accident. That doesn't preclude the fact that it may have been accidental, but we have also to consider other possibilities. As partner of Mr. Abercrombie, have you any knowledge of any affairs or any business troubles that might indirectly affect his wife?"

"Good heavens, no!" and Redmayne almost laughed. "Hugh Abercrombie has no business troubles—on the

contrary, his business conditions never were in better shape. And, too, if he had met with reverses of fortune, I suppose that is what is in your mind, he wouldn't burden his wife with the details."

"Then had Mrs. Abercrombie any troubles or perplexities in regard to her own business matters, for I understand she had money of her own?"

"As to that I have no knowledge of any sort whatever," was the reply, and this time Redmayne lost his hovering smile and looked decidedly stern.

"Such questions, Mr. Coroner, should be addressed to me," Loring said, a little pettishly. "As Mrs. Abercrombie's lawyer and trusted friend I and I alone have authoritative knowledge of her financial affairs."

"And were they in satisfactory shape?"

"I can't think what you mean by shape." Loring was purposely provoking. "But if you mean were they in order, they were. If you mean had she lost money of late, she had not. If you mean was she a rich woman, she was."

Downing would not have been flustered by this ironic vein, but Garrett was. Somewhat inexperienced as a coroner, he wasn't quite sure of the limitations of his field of inquiry, and he hesitated as to what to say next.

But he longed for more light, and he blurted out:

"Then she had no reason to be downcast or despondent because of money troubles, eh?"

"Not in the least or slightest degree."

"Had she *any* reason to be downcast or despondent?"

Garrett said this merely because he didn't know what

else to say, and he was astounded at the answer he received.

"Not unless it was some secret reason, locked in her own heart."

"Do you know of any such?" Garrett pounced on him.

"If I did it wouldn't be a secret, would it?"

"Do you?" was the dogged repetition.

Loring gave a quick glance at Hugh Abercrombie. The eyes of the two men met and clashed, and a queer crestfallen look settled over Loring's face as he said slowly but clearly, "I do not."

"Does anyone?" asked the coroner, looking around the room. "I ask you all, in the interests of justice and humanity, if you know of any sorrow or trouble in the life of Mrs. Abercrombie that seems to you of a serious nature. Please respond, anyone who can."

Redmayne's quick darting eyes scanned the faces of those about him.

A glance at Hugh showed a still, motionless figure, with bowed head and lowered eyes. Miss Mercer was equally still, but her keen blue eyes were as alert as Redmayne's own. Dr. Garth, always a noticeable personality, seemed a bit dazed.

This struck Redmayne as strange, and he let his attention stay with the medical man.

Why, he thought, hasn't he cleared up the matter as to accident? He must know whether she had any such stuff in her possession.

Getting no response to his plea, Garrett half-heartedly interviewed a few of the other servants.

The chauffeur, a young man named Platt, was inclined to be voluble.

He was asked, among other things, to what stores he had driven Mrs. Abercrombie lately when she had been out in the car alone.

He was uncertain at first, but gradually recollected certain shops she had stopped at, and among them was a chemist and dispensing druggist. Here, Platt said, she had called on several occasions. There had always been small parcels, like bottles, to take home, but he had no idea as to their contents.

This amounted to little, unless, of course, the chemist could tell them of these purchases.

The coroner turned his attention back to the members of the immediate household.

"What other guests have been here during the last few days?" he asked.

No one replied, so he repeated the question, this time addressing Hugh.

"Several, I think," was the answer. "Mr. and Mrs. Carmichael were here for a few days, and Mr. Robertson. There were others, I think, but I don't remember when they came and went. My daughter would know."

"Who are the Carmichaels?"

"Friends from Grovecliff. They went home on Thursday or Friday."

"And Robertson?'

"A friend of Mrs. Abercrombie's from New York. I don't know his address. It is doubtless in some address book."

Hugh spoke wearily, as if the whole matter was of no moment. But Redmayne took it up.

"I know Robertson," he said. "I'll get you any addresses you want, Dr. Garrett."

"No matter now," the coroner told him. "In fact, I think I have done all the questioning I want to for the present. This, of course, is merely a preliminary inquiry. The inquest will be arranged for. But now there are other matters calling for immediate attention."

He rose, and with a nod to Dr. Garth he left the room.

Garth followed, and a sudden silence fell as those who were left realized what impended.

Miss Mercer sprang into action first, and dismissed the servants.

She then turned to Hugh Abercrombie with a half-hesitating air.

"I'm wondering," she said, "if I may not be dismissed. I mean entirely."

"Leave the house?" asked Hugh, looking at her inquiringly.

"Yes, I was, of course, engaged by Mrs. Abercrombie and now I can see no reason for my remaining here at all."

"But," interposed Eric Redmayne, "it is not at all certain that the police will let you go."

"The police! What have they to say about it?"

"Probably a great deal," put in Troy Loring, who could seldom keep out of any controversy. "At any rate, I'm sure they won't excuse you until after the inquest."

"But I know nothing about the matter."

"You'll know more before you are allowed to depart." Loring laughed a little unpleasantly, and Miss Mercer turned back to Hugh.

"Don't you think I can go? Now—to-day?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," he said with a kindly intonation. "Perhaps you might ask Dr. Garth when he returns. He can advise you better than I can."

"I don't think you'll be allowed to go, Miss Mercer," Redmayne said decidedly. "As Mrs. Abercrombie's secretary, you probably have knowledge that the authorities will want. I'm sure they'll keep you here a few days. Why not make your mind up to it and stay contentedly?"

His smile met stony blue eyes, and Miss Mercer looked a little stubborn. It was plain to be seen she didn't have her red hair for nothing.

But she only said, "Very well, I'll speak to Dr. Garth about it," and walked slowly out of the room.

Hugh, Redmayne, and Loring were left alone.

"Let's face this thing squarely," Redmayne began in his decided way.

"I'll say so," Troy Loring agreed. "Better talk it over with me, Mr. Redmayne. As Eileen's lawyer, I know a lot more about her affairs than her husband does."

"Very likely," Redmayne agreed, but his tone was

cold. He didn't like Loring and never had, but after all he was the lawyer, and he must be considered.

"It isn't a question of Eileen's business affairs," Hugh observed. "We know, Troy, you keep those in apple-pie order. It's a question of how the thing happened. I don't think the police are overly quick-witted about it, but I suppose they are doing their best."

"I think they are, Hugh," his partner told him, "and you must remember they've just begun, and they have very little to work on. Besides, I daresay they have an idea that nobody here is particularly ready to help them."

"Just what do you mean by that?" Hugh asked. "Did I do anything I oughtn't to have done?"

"Not at all. But you seemed to give them no information. As to Eileen, I mean."

"I told them all I knew. I've very little information myself. Honestly, I don't know what ailed her. I thought she just had her usual attack of indigestion. I still think that is the case; and this poison stuff she somehow took by accident. It's not unprecedented. Say, two bottles in the medicine cabinet. Same size and appearance. One could easily pick up the wrong one."

"Yes," Loring said, "but all that will come out in the evidence. If there are two such bottles and it can be shown that such a mistake was or could have been made, that will give something to work on, you see. But, as yet, we have no evidence, no clues."

"Clues!" and Hugh shuddered. "You make it sound like a murder mystery."

"That," Loring said slowly, "is just what it is."

"Stop it, Loring," commanded Redmayne. "Haven't you any better sense than to talk like that? Can't you see Hugh's all in? Have a little common decency!"

"I'm not worrying about Hugh's backbone. He can pull himself together. And he may as well get used to it. He'll hear a lot before the matter is finished."

Abercrombie looked at him. His hands were gripping rather tightly the carved arms of his chair, and his steel-blue eyes were cold as he gazed into those of Troy Loring.

Then after an instant his face lost its sternness and he spoke.

"Have a heart, Troy. Remember, I've lost Eileen. Show me a little bit of consideration—I'm not utterly callous."

"No?" said Troy Loring. "No? I thought you were."

With a light laugh he rose and paced the floor of the small room.

Suddenly he turned to the others.

"All right, Hugh. I will show you consideration. I want to. Now, about Eileen's will. Oh, damn, here comes the kid!"

Maisie and Percy Van Antwerp came together through the open French window.

"Sorry I played baby game," the girl said apologetically. "But all those fool questions got on my nerves. I'm all right now. How do you do, Mr. Eric Redmayne? Are we in a mess down here, or are we not?"

"As you look at it, Miss Maisie," Redmayne re-

turned. He didn't much care for the girl, but he was always pleasant to her for her mother's sake. Like everyone else, he had admired Eileen, and was deeply grieved at her tragic death. "If it is decided, as it probably will be, that your mother's death is the result of an accident, you will, of course, be in deep sorrow, but not in what you term a mess."

"Yes, and if it is decided, as I think it will be, that it was not an accident at all, then, Mr. Eric, we'll pretty much have the devil to pay."

No one liked Maisie's manner, no one liked her loose and slangy talk, but no one could deny her beauty and charm. Small, almost elfin, she was such a graceful, bewitching little figure and her saucy, piquant face was so full of allurement that she said and did just what she chose and feared no one.

Her mother had spoiled her. Eileen, herself lovely of manner and speech, had only laughed at Maisie's rude ways, or had chid her in a half-hearted way that meant nothing at all. Mother and daughter were devoted friends, chummy companions, but not at all in filial relationship.

Maisie had ruled her mother with a rod of iron, and Eileen, herself a ruler, had loved it to be so.

And now, her mother dead, Maisie was full of grief and sorrow, but her perverse nature made her purposely appear gay and light-hearted.

Van Antwerp, deeply in love with the girl, followed her round like a spaniel, never daring to contradict her, always trying to apologize for or defend her.

Her attitude toward her stepfather was that of a good comrade and chum.

Often she would submit to his gentle advice when she would spurn the same reproof from her mother.

But for the most part she ran wild, made her own laws, and fought her own battles.

She went now and sat on the arm of Hugh's chair, one slender arm flung round his shoulders.

"Poor Daddy," she said, "poor Bobbo," going back to her childish name for him. "Well, never mind, dear, now you can marry Lorna."

## CHAPTER IV

### *Enter Kenneth Carlisle, Detective*

THE small and highly exclusive settlement of Crescent Cove, on the outskirts of which Graysands stood, was knocked galley-west by the news of the death of Eileen Abercrombie.

Easily queen of the smart summer colony, Eileen had wielded her sceptre with such gracious tact and such tactful grace that she was the idol of the whole community, with the possible exception of some jealous upstarts who envied her supremacy.

Even the younger generation adored her, for when with them Eileen seemed almost of their own age and of the same interests, and when not with them she never criticized or censured them, whatever they might do.

She was the leading spirit in all entertainments, whether social, charitable, or philanthropic, and never refused a plea for aid, either financial or personal.

Her very appearance was a tonic, an incentive. Her breezy entrance in a room, though never undignified, arrested attention always and commanded a murmur of admiration. Her smiling enthusiasm imbued everyone with a sympathetic thrill of well-being and the joy of life.

And the sudden tidings of her death were well-nigh unbelievable.

It seemed impossible for Eileen Abercrombie to be anything but alive, superlatively alive from the crown of her handsome high-flung head to the soles of her dancing feet.

Her exquisitely toned voice, her light ringing laughter, her flashing eyes and radiant smile were all part of a vitality that seemed immortal.

Yet the reaction of Crescent Cove to this knock-out blow was not so much stunned grief as wonder and curiosity.

Rumours were rife, surmises were wild, assumptions were futile, and facts were hard to come by.

Unable to get at the Graysands people, the curious besieged Dr. Garth, who gave them no satisfaction, and Percy Van Antwerp, who gave them less.

Staying at the inn as he was Percy was an easy target, but he answered all comers with the same statement: that he knew nothing beyond the bare facts, and they were already common property.

Dr. Garth, too, had no further information to give out than that Mrs. Abercrombie had died suddenly and that an investigation was in order.

But somehow or other the hint of poison was whispered and repeated with exaggerations, until the whole place rang with conjectures and suspicions, breathed first in promised secrecy and then flung to waiting, receptive ears.

Nor did their high esteem and adoration of their idol

waver. Rather, Eileen Abercrombie was elevated to the position of a saint and a martyr, and on every side were rumblings of vengeance against a possible human instrument that might have brought about her death.

Yet there were no broken hearts, no shattered lives because of this death.

Twenty years ago the tragedy would have brought unutterable woe to a dozen men whose sun rose and set in Eileen's beautiful eyes.

But now, though admiration, homage, respect, and affection were all hers, romantic love was a thing of the past.

Ninon de Lenclos herself could scarce have been more charming at forty-two than this modern woman, yet passion's fires must burn to embers as the long years drift by.

So comment was all on her grace and goodness, her personal magnetism, her well-preserved beauty, and her hold on the hearts of all who knew her.

No one suggested a lover; none hinted of a *crime passionel.*

Yet the word crime was in the air.

Not pronounced, not breathed as a syllable, but there, nevertheless.

It suggested the old, famous enigma that begins:

> 'Twas whispered in heaven, 'twas muttered in hell;
> And echo caught faintly the sound as it fell.

Yet none dared say in words that Eileen Abercrombie might have been murdered. Nor did any discuss suicide

—at least, not openly. All talk was wonderment and query.

But when the police went to the house, when the coroner followed them, and these things could not be kept secret, tongues were loosed and gossip began in earnest.

Those at Graysands knew nothing of this, but Dr. Garth and Percy Van Antwerp were ready to flee to mountain fastnesses to escape the driving, pounding force of the questions hurled at them.

Van Antwerp thought seriously of begging sanctuary at the Abercrombie home. A long-time friend of Eileen's and now a devoted admirer of Maisie, he felt he would be welcomed in this emergency.

But Van Antwerp had a fine scorn for people who demanded hospitality. He looked upon Troy Loring as a sponging sort of person, and preferred, himself, to live at the inn, and go and come as Graysands called him.

Yet he couldn't remain forever in his own room. Nor was he minded to. He went down and sat, as usual, on the broad pleasant verandah, and braved the fusillade of inquiry from the curious loungers of both sexes.

Van Antwerp was a general favourite, though not of a chummy sort. Always pleasantly polite, he invited no confidences and offered none. This was a cautionary attitude, for he well knew the ell-taking propensities of summer idlers to whom he might give an inch.

So, knowing he would be besieged and badgered, he was prepared for it, and met all intrusive remarks with a

kindly but decided reserve that left the curious ones pretty much where they were when they started.

It was Tuesday afternoon.

Eileen, he reflected, had not yet been dead twenty-four hours, yet it seemed ages. The autopsy had disclosed the fact that she had died from a large dose of the poison but was unable to determine whether she had had more than one dose. The coroner refused to express an opinion as to whether the poison was self-administered or not, declaring that the inquest must decide that question.

The inquest would be held the next day, and Van Antwerp after promising to attend had gone back to the Abercrombie Arms, greatly shaken by the ordeal of the morning.

But after luncheon and a rest in his room he felt refreshed, and now sat on the inn porch, wondering if Maisie would care to see him that evening.

He looked up as a motor came along the drive, and when a tall man jumped out and ran up the steps, Van Antwerp stared with a dawning recognition.

Surely he knew that lithe, agile walk, that swinging, graceful gait. It was, it must be, Kenneth Carlisle.

Now Kenneth Carlisle had been, until the last year, a moving-picture star of the highest magnitude.

A cinema hero, a movie idol, he had won all hearts from managers to fans, and from critics to flappers.

His work was of the best grade—sincere, talented, finished. He had put his honest efforts into it and had made a reputation that was hailed from coast to coast.

And then, surfeited with success, tired of praise and flattery, he had withdrawn from the game, and no offers of glory, fame, or lucre could tempt him to take part in another picture.

But what did happen was this. Owing to the popularity of crime plays and detective work Carlisle read and pictured much of that sort of literature.

And it got him at last. The game intrigued him, the field called to him, and unable to resist, he became a detective and went into the work with his whole soul.

He chanced to number among his friends a police sergeant of keen insight and wide experience, and the result was that when a specially difficult case turned up Kenneth Carlisle was called upon to help unravel the mystery.

He was a hard-working, hard-thinking detective of the modern school.

With no desire to imitate Sherlock Holmes, with no wish to be thought omniscient or transcendental, Carlisle wanted only a chance to use his wits and his ingenuity in the solution of mysteries that were seemingly unsolvable.

A success was to him a source of deepest satisfaction, but not a thing to be vaunted or boasted of. A failure was a grave disappointment and an occasion for searching inquiry as to his own mistakes or blunders.

And now, he had been urgently called, through the suggestion of Downing, to look into this Abercrombie matter.

For Sergeant Downing had seen at once that it was

beyond his powers, and he had small faith in the revelations the coroner's inquest would bring about.

So Carlisle had arrived, and though Van Antwerp hadn't seen him in the flesh since their college days he was familiar with his presentation on the screen and recognized him at once.

Impulsively he sprang up and followed Carlisle into the office of the inn.

"Hello, Ken," he said, and finishing his signature the detective looked up from the register.

A blank expression was quickly replaced by a smile of recognition and an outstretched hand as he exclaimed:

"Percy Van Antwerp—I'd know you among a thousand! How are you, Van?"

"Fine. It's great to see you here. Of course I'm familiar with our screen king, but how did you remember me so quickly?"

"I'm not the forgetting sort, not of our college chaps, anyway. You staying here?"

"Yes. Are you here . . ."

"In the interests of the police, yes. Don't say much in public. Can I see you after I get a room and all that?"

"Of course. Don't let me intrude. I'll be here on the porch, and you come to me or I'll come to you when you're ready."

"Righto. I daresay Downing will show up soon. Are you a friend of the Abercrombies?"

"Oh, yes. An old friend of them all. I may be useful in the way of family history."

"Yes, indeed. I want a good old hobnob with you as soon as we can get around to it. Any advice about rooms?"

"Yes. Choose the south side. Sunny in the daytime but lots cooler at night."

He left Carlisle in confab with the room clerk and returned to the seat he had left.

But a bevy of girls with their attendant boy friends were waiting for him.

"Isn't that Kenneth Carlisle?" they demanded. "Oh, Mr. Van Antwerp, will you introduce him to us? Oh, isn't it thrilling? What is he here for? Is he going to stay? Is he a friend of yours? Oh, I'm wild to meet him!"

A never-ending babble of this sort went on, until Van Antwerp began to wonder what would happen when Carlisle made his reappearance.

But probably he could look after himself. He seemed capable of anything, to judge from the impression Percy had received of him.

However, he thought it more decent to warn him.

So he sought an enclosed telephone and called the room.

"I felt I ought to tell you, Ken," he began, "that about a dozen youngsters are camped on the verandah waiting for you, and more are arriving rapidly. You'll be taken possession of as soon as you heave in sight. I know you're used to this, but I felt it the kind deed for to-day to let you know."

"Good for you, Van," Carlisle laughed. "Yes, I've been through it before, but I evade it when I can. Guess

I'll stay up here for dinner. Come along up and dine with me, won't you? We can do up old Downing in short order and then have a powwow about old times."

Pleased at the prospect, Van Antwerp willingly agreed.

He waited until nearly dinner time and then went up and rang the buzzer at the door of Carlisle's suite.

Though not large, the inn was well appointed and catered to the best people. It received the overflow of many of the big country houses and its patrons were well cared for.

Admitted by an understanding-looking personage, who was quite clearly Carlisle's own man, Percy was shown into a small sitting room, where the detective sat at a table in conference with Sergeant Downing.

"Oh, here's Mr. Van Antwerp," the sergeant said in evident relief. "He can tell you all about the family. I never saw any of them until to-day."

"Yes," Percy said, speaking gravely, "I know them all, of course. I've known them for years. But as to the case, if you call it a case, I don't know a thing. I've been thinking it over. I've sometimes imagined I had detective leanings myself, but I can't find any peg to hang suspicion on. I incline to the accident theory, as Hugh Abercrombie himself does."

"Too early yet for theories, old man," said Carlisle decidedly. "And I don't want opinions or suggestions. Those I invent for myself; all I want from you two chaps is the plain, straightaway facts."

If Van Antwerp resented being thus classed with the lowly sergeant, he found himself disarmed by a friendly smile.

Carlisle was past master in the art of charming people, and men and women alike were captivated by his personality and held as in a snare by his winsome charm.

"You're a fine detective," exclaimed Percy, sensing this cajolery at once. "Don't you know you ought to be hard and cynical and imperturbable and sarcastic and——"

"And snobbish and cryptic and generally insufferable," Carlisle interrupted him.

"Yes, all those things and then a few. Instead of that you're chummy and friendly and—and personable!"

"Well, I'm just my own kind of detective. I'm not modelling myself on anyone else. Now let's get busy. At the inquest to-morrow I shall learn all the witnesses can tell me, and that will doubtless be a lot. But I want you to tell me about the witnesses. Begin with Mr. Abercrombie."

Van Antwerp sat a few moments before he obeyed this behest.

Carlisle gave him no help, and Downing sat looking down at the floor.

"Hang it all, Carlisle," said Percy at last, "can't you dig it up for yourself somehow?"

"Of course I can, old chap. Is it unpleasant going?"

"No, not quite that. And I'd rather, maybe, you heard it from me first. You'll hear enough outside."

"Go to it, then."

"Well, then, Eileen is—was, twelve years older than her husband."

"Unusual but not a unique case."

"No. And so far as I know, there never was a ripple of unpleasantness or trouble of any sort between them. I say, so far as I know."

"I see. There are or have been rumours."

"Oh, rumours! Yes. Now, I'm about Eileen's age—I'm forty. How old are you, Ken?"

"Thirty-five. You know, you were a senior when I was a freshman."

"Yes. Yet we were good friends. Well, we'll have a good chat over those days. Now Eileen is forty-two—was forty-two when she died. But nobody would ever have believed that. Would they, Downing?"

"So everybody tells me. They all say she looked more like thirty or less."

"Yes, she did. And when I was 'long about twenty-five I met her first—a veritable angel she was—and I fell desperately in love with her. She had scores of suitors, and I was merely an also ran. She was a widow then and a stunning beauty. But it wasn't only her beauty, she had an allurement that can't be described in words. Well, never mind all that. She finally married Hugh Abercrombie, a man twelve years younger than herself. I lost sight of her for years. Lately I've known the family on visiting terms, and—well, you'll discover it anyway, so I might as well tell you that I'm crazy about Maisie, Eileen's daughter. Daughter of her first hus-

band, of course, though the girl goes by the Abercrombie name. No, we're not engaged, for Maisie's an uncertain little proposition. I think she's fond of me, but I suppose I do seem old to her. Yet she often promises to marry me—only to back out of it the next day. Of course I love her because she is like a youthful edition of her mother. A saucy, impulsive sort, full of deviltry and witchery. So, there's the situation as far as I'm mixed up in it. I think it's better for you to see just how things are. I don't mind Downing's hearing this. It's no secret. Everybody knows I'm engaged to Maisie one day and it's broken off the next."

"Glad of your frankness, Van. Now as to the husband."

"He's one of God's own noblemen. I don't know a finer man than Hugh Abercrombie, yet I can't help feeling he must be trying to live with."

"Why?"

"He's too perfect. Kind, gentle, self-sacrificing by nature, always ready to do a favour or help a friend, never speaks ill of anyone, and all that. Sort of superman, and that always makes us second-rate chaps feel small."

"Strong? Manly?"

"Oh, yes, all of that. But no temper, I mean ill temper. He'd be honestly too proud to fight if occasion called for a tussle."

"He sounds rather attractive to me."

"He is attractive."

"Devoted to his wife, of course?"

"Oh, devoted. But—hang it all, Ken—a man can't be in love with a woman twelve years older than he is."

"Why not? When the woman is all that is claimed for Mrs. Abercrombie?"

"Yes, I know. But he can't stay in love."

"Who is the other lady?"

"Good Lord, I don't mean anything like that."

"Who is she, Downing?"

"Well, sir, they do say——"

"Shut up, Downing." Van Antwerp looked stern. "I say, Carlisle, get that, if any, from somebody else, can't you?"

"He can't help getting it," murmured Downing, but he didn't divulge any name.

"Leave it for the present," agreed Carlisle. "Mrs. Abercrombie still loved her husband?"

"Worshipped him," Van Antwerp declared. "And there was never the slightest sign of discord. Don't get at the case from that angle, Carlisle."

"From no angle, Van. But I must get all points of view, you know, and as soon as may be. Any other principals in the house?"

"I don't know as you'd call 'em principals. There's a social secretary that's a bit of an enigma to me. A tall, not very attractive girl, though she has marvellous red hair and the whitest skin in the world. She may be all right, and doubtless is, but I can't see sterling worth sticking out all over her."

"What do you think of her, Downing?"

"She seems all right to me, sir."

"Because you don't see beneath that delicate epidermis," Van snorted. "And small wonder, for she loads it with powder and rouge until it's nearly hidden from sight. I never saw a girl so addicted to her compact!"

"Sounds like an interesting crowd," commented Carlisle. "What about the daughter? Does she look like her mother?"

"She does and she doesn't," said Percy slowly, and Carlisle chid himself for letting a lover get started on the subject of his affections. "She is prettier, and yet she hasn't her mother's winsomeness. I expect it's the difference in the times."

"Probably," Carlisle agreed. "The younger generation have more go and less static charm."

"Yes, something of that sort," and Van Antwerp nodded his head. He was wondering what Carlisle would really think of Maisie and whether he would try to steal her away.

"Anybody else, much? We want to turn our attention to dinner pretty soon."

"There's Troy Loring. He's Eileen's lawyer, and he's hanging about the place eternally. Can't stand him myself, but he's a necessary evil and he does keep her affairs in shape. She has no head for business herself, and Hugh prefers not to meddle with her finances."

"Guess that'll do for now. I've a sort of ground plan to work on. I won't keep you longer, Downing, and I'll see you to-morrow at the inquest. Good-bye. Look over

a book or something, Van, while I dictate a dinner on the telephone."

Carlisle gave curt but clear orders and then disappeared into his bedroom for a time.

Returning, he said pleasantly, "You've helped me a lot, old man. Lucky for me you chanced to be here. Downing is a sort of village idiot, isn't he?"

"Oh, not quite that. He has his points."

"How comes it you're here instead of at Graysands?"

"I always stay here when I'm in Crescent Cove. They urge me and all that, but I feel more independent over here, and my time's my own."

"I understand. Visiting is a bore."

"And I get sick of seeing Loring about."

"Dr. Fell?"

"Yes, rather. Besides, Maisie is mad at me so often, I might be embarrassed to have to stay under her roof."

"You mean seriously?"

"It's a little complicated. The girl is fond of me, but both parents declared me too old for her."

"Small wonder, with their own mistaken union staring them in the face."

"But it's a different matter when it's the other way. A woman older than her husband is a tragedy, but a man older than his wife is a not unusual state of things."

"Yes, I grant you that. Now, let's cut it all out till after dinner. If the food is fit to eat, I've selected a balanced ration."

"Oh, you'll find it all right, I'm sure. How are you

going to entertain me? Telling me of your Hollywood days or of your later exploits?"

"Both," said Carlisle, smiling.

And he spoke truth, and moreover he told his tales so well that Percy Van Antwerp lost all track of time and enjoyed himself to the full.

A contrast, the two men were, physically.

Percy, the perfect Percy, as Maisie called him, was of average height and weight, but his small bones and daintily made physique caused him to seem smaller than average. His light hair and pale blue eyes gave him an effect of delicacy but with no suggestion of effeminacy. His clothes were carefully chosen and worn with an air of distinction. He was sure of himself and of his own importance, yet he showed a certain something that had a touch of diffidence but was not exactly that. It was more like extreme caution or fear of seeming to obtrude his own personality.

Carlisle, on the contrary, and doubtless because of the publicity of his career, had an assured manner and showed every sign of a thorough self-understanding and self-reliance.

His dark strong face was the very sort best adapted to a screen hero, and his physical effects were full of power and grace.

His thick hair, almost black, was brushed straight back, which left big vacant triangles of brow above his temples. His mouth beneath a short, carefully shaped moustache was chiselled, and the underlip distinctly

curled over the hollow beneath it, which ended in a firm, clear-cut chin. His nose, the only feature he allowed himself to be proud of, was straight and beautiful and proclaimed him an aristocrat.

He had a trick of looking downward with his whole face but rolling up his eyes till his brow-shaded gaze was eloquent of whatever emotion he cared to suggest.

He cultivated a masterly inactivity and even a monumental calm, but on occasion these gave way to impulsive enthusiasm which showed him at his best.

"Yes, I enjoyed the pictures," he told Van Antwerp as they talked, "for it is great to feel that you're succeeding. But all of a sudden I got to the end. They palled on me, and I felt I never wanted to do another. They have no room or almost none for the exercise of mind or brain. Oh, yes, I know that statement wouldn't hold water. But I wanted something to work my thoughts on. Some puzzle to solve or problem to conquer. And when I got mixed up in a lot of detective-story plays I realized that there was my field. So I jumped into another bramble bush at once. And I love the work. I've not had a really big case yet, but this one seems to be a bit intricate."

"But you haven't the earmarks of a detective at all."

"Fine! You must be quoting from a detective story. Did you ever read one that didn't start out by saying that the detective was the farthest possible remove in appearance from the preconceived notion of a detective? Of course, I look like Kenneth Carlisle of Hollywood, but I don't care what I look like; I shall yet be

known as Carlisle, the famous detective. See if I'm not!"

"I don't doubt it in the least. But I can't feel that this case will help you along, for I can't see any chance of its being a murder case."

"Maybe not, but if I can find out what sort of case it is, that's a step in the right direction."

## CHAPTER V

### *Under the Greenwood Tree*

After Van Antwerp left him, Carlisle sat by the window of his sitting room and thought over the situation.

He had learned much from Percy, but nothing that was real evidence. However, he had got what he wanted—side lights on the various members of the Abercrombie household. Of course, since Van Antwerp was in love with the daughter, he couldn't be expected to say anything against her people.

He rather liked the description of Hugh Abercrombie and felt a desire to meet the man by himself before seeing him the next day.

Thinking this over, he acted on his impulse and went downstairs in search of Van Antwerp.

He found him in the lounge and said at once, "I say, Van, couldn't you take me over to Graysands to-night and let me have a look-see? It would be a help for to-morrow."

"Why, I could," and Percy hesitated a moment. "I'm booked for a game of bridge with some sharks, but they'll let me off, I guess. Better telephone first, though, and see if Hugh's at home."

"I should think he'd be pretty sure to be at home."

"Never can tell. I'll call him up, shall I?"

A few moments later Van Antwerp told him that Abercrombie was at home but begged to be excused from seeing anyone.

"Said he was all in and had already refused to see several people, so doesn't feel he can make an exception in your case. Sorry. I'd have managed to go with you if we could have gone."

"Oh, well, never mind. Go ahead with your bridge, and I'll go for a short stroll and then turn in early."

Starting out, Carlisle walked over toward the business section of the town, with a vague idea of dropping in at the police station.

But as he looked off toward the water and noted the attractions of the colony of summer homes, he turned his steps that way and was soon nearing Graysands. He recognized the place from descriptions he had heard of it, and a feeling of mingled interest and curiosity drew him toward it.

A highroad ran between the estate and the water front, and a neatly trimmed privet hedge bordered the wide lawn.

There were no gates, and feeling a little like an intruder Carlisle stepped inside the domain.

The night was dark, the avenue lights being few and far between, and though it was mid-September the weather was still decidedly warm.

A seat under an enormous maple tree tempted him and he sat down there. It was that variety of maple

whose long branches hang to the ground, almost like a weeping willow, and Carlisle was entirely hidden from the view of passers-by.

He could see the big house, a beautiful, château-like structure, and he noticed a few lights in various rooms.

He felt a pang of real regret to think of the woman who had queened it here, and her tragic fate.

He was not smoking and was sitting silently when he heard steps that seemed to him stealthy. Looking about he saw two shadowy figures quite evidently making for the very place where he was sitting.

Though one of the most honourable of men in ordinary circumstances, Carlisle had a rooted conviction that all was fair in love and war. And if this Abercrombie matter was a murder case, Carlisle was prepared for war.

Rising silently, he passed round the big tree trunk until he was hidden behind it, and not a second too soon, either, for just then two people entered the leaf-draped enclosure.

A man and a woman they were, and without a word they sat down in the very spot Carlisle had just vacated.

"Neckers," he thought to himself, a little inelegantly, but the scent of Hollywood hung round him still.

He scarcely dared peep, but he listened, and he realized at once that these were no carefree youngsters, but a serious-minded pair with grave matters to discuss.

"I had to see you," the man began in a low, constrained voice that told of suppressed emotion.

"Yes," was the scarcely breathed reply, and a choked sob followed the word.

"Beloved—dear heart—what can I say!" The tone was agonized, and Carlisle wished to heaven he was somewhere else.

Detective work was all very well, but when it came to listening in on a scene of this kind, he felt he couldn't stand for it. Yet what could he do? To step forward and announce his presence was the honourable procedure, but wouldn't that embarrass them far more than if he kept still? He could close his ears to their talk, and he could forget everything he had already heard.

But even these thoughts were banished by the next sentence that was breathed into the still summer air.

"I can't believe Eileen is—gone——"

The halting words were uttered by the man, and his voice was awed, as of one in the very presence of a miracle.

There was a pause before the woman spoke.

Then she said in soft, cultured accents, "I want to tell you——"

"No, no," he whispered, "let's not talk. Just let me hold you close for a moment—so—my best beloved."

"For the last time," she said with a solemn slowness; "the last time, dear."

He gave a little laugh, a happy little laugh it sounded, and then murmured, "No, don't speak."

So silent were they then that Carlisle scarce breathed lest he be heard.

And he had half an idea that he was heard, for there

came to him the merest suggestion of a sibilant whisper, like a far-off echo, and immediately the two moved softly away.

They made no haste, they showed no alarm, but he saw their two forms step out from the sheltering tree and move slowly toward the gravelled drive.

They separated, the woman going out through the open gate and the man walking slowly toward the house.

"Abercrombie," guessed Carlisle, "and the other woman!"

It was only a guess, but he felt sure it was a true one.

He resumed his seat on the circular bench that circled the tree and gave himself up to speculation.

And suddenly he realized that if the man was Abercrombie and if the woman was his sweetheart, it was more than important, it was vitally necessary, to remember what they had said.

Well, what had they said? Practically nothing at all.

He had remarked that he couldn't believe Eileen was dead, and she had tried to tell him something to which he refused to listen. That was all save for a few incoherent words of endearment.

And perhaps they were not the people he had in mind at all. Plenty of her friends would find it difficult to realize Mrs. Abercrombie's death.

Perhaps the girl was the daughter of the house, the tempestuous Maisie.

But, no, he concluded, that was the voice of an older woman, not a young girl.

There seemed to be more lights in the house now. Perhaps callers had come who refused to be sent away. Perhaps Abercrombie had consented to see some visitors more welcome than Carlisle would have been.

He sat still in his pleasant nook and watched. He wanted to smoke, but he had a hope of seeing somebody or something of interest and tobacco might cramp his style.

Suddenly he was rewarded for his patience. Two figures in white frocks came toward the maple tree.

"I'm learning the ropes," Carlisle chuckled to himself, and hastily scuttled round the tree trunk and took up the position he had occupied before.

The two he had seen sauntered into the leafy circle and sat down on the bench. There was nothing furtive or stealthy about these two.

A flapper girl and another girl somewhat older, Carlisle judged them, and he listened without any twinges of conscience.

"Do stay, Maude," the younger girl was saying earnestly. "You don't know how much I want you!"

"Nonsense," came the response, "you don't need me at all. If ever anyone was able to look out for herself you're that very one."

"I know, but it's a comfort to have you here. And there's such oodles to be done! Notes to write, flowers and things to be acknowledged, reporters to see—oh, I never could take care of it all, and I don't want to get a new social secretary just now!"

Oho, so this was the secretary Van Antwerp had told of and with her, doubtless, was the girl Maisie.

Surely, Carlisle thought, his lucky star was in the ascendant to-night. Maybe if he stayed all night under the tree he'd have the whole mystery solved and could go home to-morrow.

They said a little more on the subject of the secretary remaining at Graysands, though the question was not settled.

Then the girl exclaimed suddenly:

"Now, you see, I don't have to marry Percy."

"But I thought you wanted to!" said the other as if surprised. "I thought it was your mother's objection to the marriage that kept you off it."

"Fiddle-dee-dee! You didn't think any such thing! You must know me well enough by this time to know that what I want to do is what other people don't want me to do."

"You have what is known as a lovely disposition, haven't you?"

The girl's spontaneous laughter was quickly suppressed, and she said:

"Oh, angelic! But when Eileen tried to make me give up my perfect Percy, of course I hung onto him for all I was worth. Now, if there's nobody to say I shan't marry him, why the devil should I marry him?"

"You're a terror," came the high-pitched even voice of the secretary. "I wonder what will happen to you in the long run. And now, without your mother, you will run wild, I suppose."

"I suppose so. Of course, Bobbo has no control over me. He doesn't always know I exist. Wonder what he'll do. No, no—don't suggest anything!"

"I didn't intend to. I have no interest in Mr. Abercrombie or you or anyone here at all, now that your mother is gone. I only want to get away——"

"H'm, you're not much more of a sweet little Lucy than I am! Well, promise me you'll stay for a while, anyhow. Until I can get things into running order. You see that Loring brute will have to go over papers and accounts, and you must be here to show him where such things are. And besides—Miss Mercer—oh, Miss Mercer—I have a ghost of an idea—a shred of a suspicion—a dim, shadowy notion that you——"

"Go on," said the other, a quick strained note in her voice that sounded to Carlisle like fear, "go on, tell me!"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" and Maisie laughed softly. Then she broke into a strain of an old Gilbert and Sullivan opera.

> Things are seldom what they seem,
> Skim milk masquerades as cream,

she sang in a half-whisper, while the secretary gave a short, sharp gasp of dismay.

"Stop your nonsense," she said sternly. "Keep your dim ideas to yourself, or I leave here to-morrow."

"No, no, don't leave! Oh, Maude, dear Maude, don't leave!"

The very tones of Maisie's voice were so teasing, the

inflections so artfully annoying, that Carlisle felt if he were in the social secretary's place he would box the ears of this little nuisance.

But Miss Mercer's mood had changed.

She rose, and with no sign of impatience or resentment she said:

"Come along, Maisie, let's go in the house."

And, also to Carlisle's surprise, the girl said obediently, almost deferentially, "Yes, come on. I'm ready."

They went away at once, and Carlisle watched their shadowy shapes until they were lost in the darkness of the shrubbery.

"Well, I'll be goldarned," he remarked silently. "A detective's life is not a monotonous one, to say the least. Two exciting episodes in half an hour. I'll camp for a while longer; the real murderer may yet show up. Anyway, I've made the acquaintance of the principals in this unfolding drama, even if they haven't made mine. None of them impressed me deeply except the scalawag Maisie. She promises further interest. But she isn't taking her mother's death much to heart. What callous little brats the girls of to-day are. And the Mercer person! I didn't see her, but I can visualize her as a gawky old maid, full of inhibitions and suppressions and all those unpleasant things that tag after lost youth.

"Then there's the old man's sweetheart. Though to be sure he isn't an old man. About our age, Van said. And I'll tell the breathlessly waiting universe that anyone with a wife twelve years his senior can be forgiven by a disinterested observer for stepping out a little."

He sat long, pondering over all he had heard and fixing it in his memory.

"Poor old Percy," he chuckled. "He needn't feel sure of his lady love. Though I don't think he does. But what she said to-night meant nothing. Nothing means anything to that sort of noodle. If Percy wants her I hope he gets her, but she has no message for me."

Rising at last he sauntered along, not toward the gate but in the direction of the house.

"Small hope of any more strolling players to-night," he soliloquized. "'I met a fool i' the forest'—I sure did, but I won't meet any more. 'That tree's like a mouse trap—a good one, for the world beats a path to its door,' or whatever it is I'm getting at. When I get rich I'm going to instal a resident Mr. Bartlett to verify all quotations. Hello, here's the front elevation of Graysands, and in about a couple of shakes I'll be arrested for trespassing."

He cautiously drew near a lighted window. It seemed to be a sort of study or small library, and inside were two men.

One, Carlisle felt pretty sure, was Abercrombie himself. The descriptions he had heard of the man, combined with the outlines of his figure which he had dimly discerned under the maple tree, bore him out in his opinion.

The other was a stranger, and he was earnestly talking, even dictating, with imperious, commanding gestures.

To Carlisle's disgust the window was closed, and

others which were open gave him no foothold because of tall, close-growing shrubs which came up to the very sills.

The room was most attractive, the appointments chosen with the best taste and judgment, and the two men seemed friendly enough; but clearly Abercrombie was unwilling to accede to the wishes of the other.

"His lawyer, most likely," Carlisle decided, but he was wrong, for it was Eric Redmayne, Hugh's partner.

He was urging a measure unacceptable to his listener, though this Carlisle couldn't discover until much later. Had that window been open to the eavesdropper a very different twist would have been given to coming events.

A sigh, so loud that it might have been audible to the talkers in the library, escaped Carlisle's breast, and he turned disconsolately homeward.

He passed round the house but saw nothing further of interest and trudged back to the Abercrombie Arms, contented though not entirely satisfied.

"A great game," he told himself as he made ready for bed, "and like all other games, half skill and half luck. With the biggest half luck."

And then, having defied mathematics and murdered the King's English, he went soundly to sleep and dreamed of nothing at all.

Next morning, fresh and smiling, in one of his most distinguished suits, Kenneth Carlisle braved the fierce

light that follows up a movie idol and went downstairs to breakfast. He was relieved to find very few guests in the dining room.

These stared at him, of course, but he was spared any real demonstration. The habitués of Abercrombie Arms were people of correct manners and possessed of worldly wisdom.

Van Antwerp beckoned him to his table.

"If you like," he said, motioning to a chair. "If you prefer your own vine and fig tree, pick one out. I shan't be offended."

"No, I'd rather sit with you," Carlisle said simply.

"You're very well togged." And Percy gave an admiring glance at the other's clothing.

"All right?" asked Carlisle indifferently.

"Is it the left-over effects of the screen work that makes for such perfection?"

"Don't be an ass," said Carlisle, smiling. "And no, it isn't. I just happen to have clothes sense, that's all. I spend mighty short time on selection."

"That's it, then." Percy seemed satisfied. "Woman or man, nothing gets anywhere but clothes sense. Few have it."

"I'll agree Now cut out the patter and tell me things. We go to the inquest to-day?"

"We do. At ten, I believe. Want to go over sooner and meet Hugh, since you couldn't see him last night?"

"No, I don't think so. What did you do, play cards all the evening?"

"Yes, pretty much so. I saw you come in. By the way,

you seemed darned well pleased with yourself. Rather like the cat that engulfed the canary. What happened to you?"

Carlisle was dumbfounded. Was he wearing his heart on his sleeve to that extent? But he quickly grasped the situation, wrestled with it, and threw it.

"Nothing but the general sense of well-being engendered by a good dinner, a good cigar, and a walk along the shore. But for heaven's sake, how did you see me? I looked all about for you."

"I chanced to be seated at a card table with my back to you as you passed through the hall. But there was a big mirror opposite me, and I couldn't help seeing you. No offence intended."

"And none taken, silly! I was only thinking you're a bit of a sleuth yourself, it would seem. Can't we join forces?"

Van Antwerp looked up with a pleased smile.

"Nothing I'd like better, Ken. But I'm entirely inexperienced—can only offer a quick eye and a smattering of psychoanalysis."

"I like the eye idea better than the other. But I don't want a Watson. I mean I don't care for a peg to hang my deductions on. I want a philosopher and friend while I do the guiding myself."

"Not entirely clear, but I'll take the position on trial, if you like. Really, I'm not so bad at ratiocination."

"Now I know you're an old hand at the bellows. Nobody ever got off that grand old word as slick as that without being extremely familiar with it. All right,

Van, we'll have a try at it and whichever of us wants to can say 'Hold, enough!' at any time."

"I'll go you. Now, as to confidences. Do we tell each other everything we know?"

Carlisle hesitated. He wondered if Percy could possibly know that he had spent much of the evening before in the grounds of Graysands. If not, he certainly had no intention of making the fact public.

"I'm not prepared to go that far," he said slowly. "I think it wouldn't suit my book. Suppose we use our own discretion as to that."

"All right. You're the boss. I mean as to rules and regulations. I assume our relations are about fifty-fifty."

"Oh, yes, and we're not tied down in any way. I'm assuming you want this affair cleared up."

"Oh, Lord, yes. Unless, that is, it should——"

"Should come home to someone you care for. Well, we'll have to chance that—for what I begin I like to finish."

"Then let's put it like this: I'll go with you as far as I can, and if I have to I'll drop out."

"That goes. Now, as a starter, do you feel like telling me who is the lady whose name is, or is likely to be, coupled with that of Hugh Abercrombie?"

"I've been thinking that over, and as you're bound to discover it, I may as well tell you. She is Miss Garth, Lorna Garth, the daughter of the doctor."

"Is it an open affair?"

"Oh, Lord, no. Few suspect it. And it isn't even an

affair. But I happen to know that they have cared for one another a long time. Yet so loyal and honourable a man is Hugh Abercrombie that he would never take a step that would lead to the unhappiness of his wife."

"You're looking backward?"

"Of course. I mean he never would have done so. Now that wife is dead, and—what is to be, will be."

"Speak out, Van. Are you suggesting anything—anything at all?"

"I am not. I respect and admire Hugh beyond all men. I believe him to be a martyr, a saddened man, because he cannot love the woman he is—was tied to, and does love another woman."

"And she? Miss Garth?"

"She, too, is the very salt of the earth. An affair, a secret or underhanded affair would be as impossible for her to enter into as for Hugh. They are two innocent lambs bound by convention and honour to stay apart when their hearts are breaking to be together."

"Tragedy all round."

"Just that. Now, Eileen is out of it, and for heaven's sake, Ken, do your very damnedest to prove it a natural death or an accident or even a suicide, but not—not a murder."

## CHAPTER VI

### *Testimony But No Evidence*

"So YOU scorn the offer of my knowledge of psychoanalysis as a help in your research work, do you?"

Van Antwerp and Carlisle were walking over to Graysands to attend the inquest.

"Scorn isn't just the right word. I'm a stickler for terminology, Percy, and I'd rather sit all day, like Sentimental Tommy, waiting for the right word to come to me, than to use a wrong one."

"All right, if you're so punctilious, I'll ask you not to call me Percy. I hate the name, but I've got to use it on my checks and tombstone, I suppose. You needn't throw it at me, though."

"Van, then. But as to psychoanalysis, it's all right in its place and when used by those who have a proper sense of values. If you can qualify, go to it, but I won't stand for any jargon that doesn't ring true as steel."

"Piffle. Don't you know me well enough to realize that I'm aware of my limitations, first, last, and all the time? Wasn't it by true psychoanalyzing that I knew you were elated when you walked into the inn last night? You weren't smiling or whistling or even walking with unusually elastic tread. How did I know?"

"By a combination of all those telltale indications. I wasn't actually singing or waving my arms about, but I had an impulse to do so. It showed in my general demeanour. That isn't psychoanalysis."

"Near enough for me. What were you tickled to death about?"

"Oh, because I've got this case to work on. I'm truly sorry the lovely lady is dead, but since that can't be remedied I'm glad I've got the matter to look into."

"You're a ghoul."

"No more than any detective has to be. And if there were no detectives we'd be overrun with criminals. No cheap sarcasm at this point, please."

"All right, I'll keep my analyses to myself. What, in your opinion, are the first requirements of your calling?"

"Psychology, a totally different proposition from psychoanalysis. Then a knowledge of human nature and a power of observation. Ability to ask questions. A nature suspicious of everybody. Endless patience and perseverance. And, most of all, luck."

"You got all those things?"

"To a degree. And that degree determines my success as a detective."

"I daresay you're right. But you ought to be a little more spectacular. You needn't eat hashish or play on a saxophone, but I think you need high lights of some sort."

"No, I'm a plain-clothes man in mind as well as body. When I learned bridge the first rule my teacher gave me was to avoid mannerisms. I've carried that rule into

other matters with good effect. So as a detective I try to avoid mannerisms. I never look bored, or yawn prodigiously, or pull at my ear, or effect unusual diction. The fine feathers of the omniscient detective do not make a fine bird to my way of thinking."

"Then you rank yourself among the omniscient detectives?"

"If I were a fancy detective I'd say *touché* at that. But instead I will say that you're a quick-witted beggar, and I'm glad I've conjuncted with your orbit again. I hate to disappoint you about those high lights, but I can't stick 'em. I never say forrader or young feller-me-lad. They just don't appeal to me. Now that we're getting near the house, tell me one or two things. What made Mr. Abercrombie marry a woman so much older than himself?"

"She did."

"How?"

"She just commandeered him. I don't believe there was anything on earth that woman couldn't have got if she wanted it. So, she saw Hugh, wanted him, and took him. Regular *veni, vidi, vici* business, you know. You've no idea of her charm. Not vampy or of the adventuress type. Just lovely and compelling. And fine; the very perfection of all that was rare and choice both physically and mentally. *Exquise*—that's the word for her, since you're exact. And yet a good pal—a blithe, happy nature that was all human—no goddess or that sort of bunk."

"And her husband loved her—at first?"

"Oh, yes, in a way. You see, he—well, he was rather kidnapped. She swooped down and gathered him in before he fairly knew what had happened."

"You were a spectator?"

"You bet I was. I was in love with her myself. Who wasn't? And by my analytic powers that you scoff at I understood the whole performance. But I couldn't do anything; it wasn't my place to try. So they were wed, and merrily rang the bells. Then by slow degrees Hugh woke up to realities, and he took it like a hero. Don't get it in your head there was any affair between him and Lorna Garth. They're two high-strung souls, but they're high minded, and they would scorn a secret love affair."

"All right," said Carlisle, "not knowing them as yet I'll take your word for that. Is it going to count against them to-day?"

"I don't know. I hope not. That's why I want you to lead the jury around to a conviction that the thing was an accident."

"As if I could do that!"

"You can try."

"Did she want Abercrombie for his money?"

"Oh, no. She had shoals of suitors—lots of them wealthy. And she had prospects herself which have since materialized. She just fell for him, that's all. He's an attractive man, but a sort of Johnny-look-in-the-air. Never seems to have both feet on the ground. Visionary, imaginative, sensitive, but with the highest ideals and standards. If he loves Lorna Garth, I'll bet the knowledge of it causes him more pain than joy. He'd

be all self-reproach and remorse. Yet he can't help it."

"By Jove, Van, you are a bit of an analyzer."

"Yes, I told you so. Now here we are at the gate. Let's walk round by the tea house, and you can see the place. Fine old trees."

"Very," Carlisle said with a quick glance at the one they were just passing, an enormous maple with a seat built round it.

They came to the tea house, a charming little structure of Japanese influence, its verandahs enclosed by bamboo screens.

"Come in and take a look at it," Percy suggested. "It's always open."

The large open interior was beautifully furnished with gems of Japanese art, but sideboards and glimpses of well-filled pantries gave hints of merrymakings of more Occidental effects.

"Beautiful old silver," said Carlisle, noticing a tray full of tall cups that were obviously antiques.

"Yes, Eileen was crazy on the subject. Those highball glasses were her latest find. She laughed when we called them glasses or goblets. And tumblers seemed inadequate."

"Of course. They're beakers."

"So they are! We all tried to find the right word and never thought of that. I wish we had. Poor Eileen. She was so happy over any new possession. I never knew anyone so keen about things—beautiful things."

"That party, Thursday, was that the last time she entertained?"

"Why, I don't know. Yes, I think likely it was. At least, I wasn't invited to any after that"

"Were you here that day?"

"Oh, yes. Not in here; I spent all the time outside with Maisie. Playing tennis and all that. And we had our tea in an arbour. It was a big affair. Tables everywhere."

"Did you see Mrs. Abercrombie that afternoon?"

"Oh, yes. When I arrived, of course. She looked just as usual, gracious, queenly, a picture in her gown of pale flowered chiffon. Smiling and happy, a perfect hostess."

"Too bad, a woman like that swept away. Well, shall we be getting along?"

Van Antwerp nodded, and they turned to go.

A slight sound caused Carlisle to turn round, and he saw Percy pick up some small thing from a side table and slip it in his side coat pocket.

Intense curiosity awoke in Carlisle's breast.

What could Van want to take away that he would be sly about? Surely he was not stealing a piece of old silver.

Wherefore, as they walked along together, hastening their steps a little when they noted the hour, the detective carefully let his hand drop into his companion's pocket and come out again bearing the small object in question.

To his disgust, a furtive glance told him it was a cigarette holder, neither new nor valuable, just a shiny black affair with two tiny bands of gold round it.

Beyond all doubt it was Percy's own and he had retrieved it with no thought of secrecy about it.

Carlisle deftly returned it to the pocket it came from

and closely watched for any sign of knowledge of the deed on Van Antwerp's part but saw none.

They walked briskly across the lawn and along the winding path to the house.

On a slight and somewhat rocky eminence the picturesque building with its gay awnings and flower boxes gave no effect of a house of sorrow.

But once inside the drawn blinds and the ominous silence of the place told the tale.

They were met by Eric Redmayne, who introduced himself as Abercrombie's partner.

"I hope you can get to the bottom of this thing, Mr. Carlisle," he said, not pausing for amenities. "To my mind it is a very mysterious matter."

"Don't be too anxious to spot a crime," Percy put in. "I think, Redmayne, there are other and better theories to work on."

"It may be," was the terse response. "But we must find out. As good citizens we can't let anybody do murder and get away with it."

"Why have you come to the conclusion that it is murder, Mr. Redmayne?" Carlisle asked.

"Only what is plain on the face of things. Mrs. Abercrombie was not a woman who would ever dream of taking her own life, nor was she of the careless type who could drink poison by mistake. Had she done so, she would have suspected it herself and called immediate assistance."

"You sound logical," Carlisle agreed, "but I suppose all that will be brought out at the inquest."

They crossed the big main hall and turning into a side corridor went toward the ballroom, which had been decided upon for the inquest.

Many people were assembled there. Neighbours and curiosity-mongers filled rows of seats. Reporters were in their places.

At the end of the room a long table was the special province of the coroner, and a smaller table was allotted to the jury.

To an observant onlooker it was plain to be seen that Coroner Garrett realized his crowded hour of importance and meant to make the most of his limelighted performance.

Carlisle, as chief investigator, was given a seat near Garrett, and Van Antwerp went quickly over and sat down by Maisie, who had held a chair for him.

The preliminaries were disposed of methodically and as quickly as was compatible with careful work.

Corinne, the maid, told of finding her mistress dead in bed on Tuesday morning and answered intelligently all questions about it.

Dr. Garth told of his diagnosis of death resulting from poison and how it was later confirmed by the autopsy.

As family physician he testified that Mrs. Abercrombie had no organic ailment of any kind, and there were no slightest symptoms of any physical disturbance save the fatal effects of the administration of the deadly poison, bichloride of mercury.

At Garrett's request the doctor detailed how much of the drug was necessary to bring about a fatal effect,

and shorn of its technical terms, the fact seemed to remain that either a large single dose or several smaller ones must have been absorbed.

"From what you have been told of the lady's symptoms, what do you surmise happened?" the coroner inquired.

"I gather," Dr. Garth replied, "that Mrs. Abercrombie swallowed a large dose of the poison on Thursday afternoon, that is, the day of the lawn party. I think this, because I have learned that she was in the tea house after the last guest had gone, perhaps about half-past six or seven o'clock."

"Who told you this?"

"The maid, Corinne."

"Let her tell this part herself."

Nothing loath, and with the air of being a star witness, Corinne took up the tale.

"Madame was in the tea house after the guests had all departed. Fetter, going there to look after things, found her there. She was in great distress and told Fetter to call me, which he did. I went to Madame's assistance and found her really ill."

"In what way?"

"She complained of a strange tightness, constriction in her throat. Also of burning heat in her stomach. There was nausea, her lips turned white, and her breath came quickly and short. She gasped out what she would say, which was the request that I get her quickly to her bed. I did so, for Fetter helped me to take her across to the house."

"She was able to walk, then?"

"Yes, with our assistance. I put her to bed, and she did not get up again that evening. But Mrs. Abercrombie was a very brave lady, and she forbade me to tell anyone that she was ill but to say she was merely tired by the excitement of the garden party."

"All of this, Dr. Garth, would be the probable result of the poison you described?"

"The inevitable result."

"Then we must assume that Mrs. Abercrombie swallowed that poison while in her tea house?"

"I can see no other possibility. I understand she was there the whole afternoon."

"Yes, so I am told. Who was the last one known to have seen her there?"

Garrett paused, looking toward the members of the family and the others who sat near them.

No one spoke, and he put a direct question to Maisie.

"You were in the tea house late in the afternoon?" he said inquiringly.

"Oh, I was in and out a dozen times," she replied. "I was there continuously at first receiving the guests, then I drifted away and only stuck my nose in now and then to see how things were going. I didn't notice Mother being ill at all. She looked all right to me."

"When did you see her there last?"

"About half-past six, I think."

"Was she alone?"

"Yes."

"What was she doing?"

"She was drinking something out of one of her new silver beakers."

"What was she drinking?"

"I couldn't possibly see. It wasn't a glass, you know, but a tall silver tumbler."

"Did she speak to you?"

"Oh, yes. She said, 'Run along and dress for dinner. I'll come in a few moments,' or something of that sort. She was positively all right then."

"Dr. Garth, supposing for a moment that the drink Mrs. Abercrombie was then taking had contained poison and supposing no further dose was taken by her at any time, would the result have been fatal, as it was, after several days?"

"It is quite within the possibilities," the doctor said decidedly. "More, it is a probable case, if the amount of poison taken at that time was sufficiently large."

"Then, had the lady contemplated suicide she could have brought it about in that way and at that time?"

"She could have done so, yes. But it is highly improbable. Anyone contemplating suicide would be far more likely to seek the shelter of a bedroom or bathroom, not a scene of a gay festival."

"That is mere surmise. We may conclude, then, that the theory of suicide is compatible with the facts so far as we know them. Now, the theory of accident must also be considered. But this theory is almost untenable if, as we are led to suppose, the poisoning occurred at the time and place we are discussing. For surely no poison

of such a dangerous nature would be stored in the pantry of the tea house, nor would Mrs. Abercrombie be likely to pour it into her drink, whatever that may have been. Remains, therefore, one more theory, that of wilful murder. Should this have been the case, it is obvious that the murderer poisoned the drink in the silver goblet and then went away before Mrs. Abercrombie's daughter appeared on the scene."

"Impossible!" cried Maisie irrepressibly. "Mother was taking the drink, whatever it was, when I ran in. She spoke to me, and I ran away again, leaving her still sipping the drink. I saw no one in the path, and I am sure it was some harmless refreshing drink after her weary afternoon."

"It cannot be decided positively what the drink was. Will the butler please step forward again?"

But neither Fetter nor any of his assistants could give any information on this point. The glasses and the new silver drinking cups were all taken to the pantry and washed and put in their places, with no thought of what had been in them. There had been tea and coffee, both hot and iced. There had been lemonade and fruit punch. There had been carbonated waters and ginger ale. Yes, there had been spirits for any who desired such, but not much had been used.

"So," the coroner summed this up, "it cannot be determined what Mrs. Abercrombie was drinking. Nor does it seem to me to matter. It was beyond all doubt an innocuous drink of some sort into which had been dropped the poison."

"You feel sure of that?" said Kenneth Carlisle in a low tone to the self-satisfied coroner.

A sudden annoyed look was turned on the speaker, and then Garrett, disarmed by Carlisle's interested and sympathetic gaze, said quietly, "Yes, Mr. Carlisle, I think we may feel sure of that. The circumstances permit of no other conclusion."

"No, perhaps not," was Carlisle's conciliatory response, but he noted the effect on the jury and felt satisfied.

As a matter of fact, Carlisle's belief coincided with that of the coroner, but he felt it was not a matter to be decided in such an offhand way.

A few of the other servants gave unimportant testimony, and then Hugh Abercrombie was called to the stand.

Quiet, dignified, his face full of a great sorrow, he took the indicated chair, and the entire audience seemed to hold its breath.

"Will you state, Mr. Abercrombie," the coroner said after certain necessary preliminaries had been complied with, "whether you know of any fact or have any opinion that can throw any light on the sudden death of your wife."

"I know of no facts not already brought forth in this inquiry," Hugh answered.

He showed no signs of any deep feeling. His pale, strained face carried its own story of a tortured mind, and his nervous fingers moved restlessly, but his voice was steady and his manner free from any trace of em-

barrassment or perturbation. His gray-blue eyes had a wistful expression not without its appeal. To many in that audience came a feeling of resentment that this man must be subjected to questioning.

He went on steadily: "You have asked my opinion. I must say that I have no opinion regarding this tragedy that can help your quest in any way. I cannot believe my wife took her own life; I cannot think anyone deliberately poisoned her. I can only hold the opinion that the cause of her death was an accident, though I can suggest no theory as to how it came about."

"It may be your opinion is the correct one," said Garrett suavely.

Somehow one had to be suave with Hugh Abercrombie. In no way bidding for sympathy or pity, he commanded it by his very absence of a claim.

Secretly, Garrett wanted to grill him, wanted to charge him with some withheld information regarding his wife's death, but when he looked at the grief-stricken man such words would not come.

Yet there was one subject that Garrett felt he must bring up.

The hardest of all, perhaps, yet of paramount importance.

He looked gravely at Abercrombie, and then, not pausing to think of a more tactful way of beginning, he plunged boldly in.

"You and your wife were on good terms, Mr. Abercrombie?"

Hugh looked thunderstruck. The suddenness of the attack nearly bowled him over. His white face went a shade whiter, his deep-set eyes seemed to go farther back into their sockets, but also his head went up and his shoulders seemed to square a little as might a man bracing himself for a knock-down blow.

Yet his words were simple.

With a calm, gentle inflection, he said merely:

"Yes, Mr. Coroner, we were on perfectly good terms."

And Garrett knew exactly as much as he had before he asked the question.

Kenneth Carlisle chuckled silently to himself. He had taken a liking to Hugh Abercrombie, and he wished desperately that he knew what the conversation had been about that he saw but could not hear through the library window the night before.

He remembered the stolen interview between Abercrombie and Lorna Garth, but as to that he was holding an open mind. He had no wish to condemn anyone unheard, but he began to realize that this case had many ramifications.

Garrett was not content to let the matter drop.

"There was no ill-feeling between you on any subject?" he persisted.

"None at all," said Hugh politely but coldly.

"The lady was much older than yourself?" asked Garrett.

Abercrombie's eyebrows went up a little, with him a sure sign of mild reproof.

"She was older by twelve years," he said calmly.

"That is a big difference," said Garrett rather excitedly. "You could not have had similar tastes or——"

"I fear, Dr. Garrett, you are outside your proper field of inquiry. Kindly leave such personalities out of the conversation. I assure you I am within my rights in requesting this."

Awed more by the tone than the words, Garrett turned red. He dropped his eyes to the notes before him and fumbled over some papers.

A hush fell over the room, and Abercrombie's face took on a look of utter despair. He still showed a certain hauteur, a calm, proud bearing, but his eyes were fastened on the motions of the coroner's fingers, and horror showed in his glance as Garrett drew from the pile a folded paper or letter.

Almost as one hypnotized, Hugh watched the unfolding of that paper.

Before opening the last fold, Garrett spoke again:

"You say, Mr. Abercrombie, that there was no disagreement, no reason for a quarrel between you and your late wife?"

"We never quarrelled," was the reply, but now the glance of the tortured blue eyes was stony.

"You had no matter under discussion, you two, that might have led to a question of divorce?"

"Certainly not," came the quick reply, but with a slight quaver in the enunciation.

"Then what is the meaning of this letter from Mrs. Abercrombie regarding a divorce from you?"

## CHAPTER VII

### *The Ways of Witnesses*

"I NEVER received any such letter from my wife."

Hugh sat quietly, without a sign of agitation or embarrassment. He presented an aspect of calm superiority, yet his deep eyes were filled with a great sadness.

He was heartsick with the horror of it all, yet in the far-away fastnesses of his brain there rang the soft, sweet note of a joy bell, a sound that refused to be stilled or ignored.

Carlisle watched him closely, unable to make up his mind about this strange man.

For Kenneth Carlisle was a judge of human nature and a skilled reader of the human countenance. He held that the experiences he had passed through in his Hollywood career had left him past grand master in the art of registration of sensations or emotions as depicted by his own features or those of another. He felt capable of judging when the impressions conveyed to his senses were true and real and when they were false and artificial.

So he looked gravely at Hugh Abercrombie.

He saw, he told himself, a man of phenomenal strength of will, yet often incapable of putting forth

this strength because of his innate unwillingness to hurt or offend another. In no way cringing or meek, Abercrombie would, Carlisle felt sure, suffer tortures rather than bring pain or sorrow to another.

How, then, the detective pondered, could this man have an affair with another woman, which if discovered would be a knock-down blow to his wife?

He glanced curiously at the other woman.

Lorna Garth, as he had learned her to be, sat beside her father, the doctor.

Carlisle had ascertained her identity, but he would have known anyway that she was the one who had sat with Abercrombie under the maple tree the night before.

He had not then had a distinct look at her, but he had glimpsed enough of her personality to recognize it.

She was beautiful in a Madonna fashion, yet without the attribute of saintliness. Her face of a dead-white pallor showed clearly where rouge had been applied. Delicately done and just right in amount and colour, it pitifully failed to seem the glow of health or happiness. The softly curved lips would, Carlisle knew, be pale or white without the carmine of the lipstick. The large dark eyes, wide apart in the low, broad brow, were schooled to an expression of natural interest, but through this showed, to a practised eye, a look of unconquerable fear.

Miss Garth was, he judged, about twenty-five or so, and her straight slim form was graceful in its lines of careless ease. Perfectly gowned in a modish beige-

coloured costume, with small close hat to match, she sat quietly, and strove to appear not too deeply concerned.

But to Carlisle's experienced eyes, the girl was nearly crazy.

The few glances that she allowed herself to flash at Hugh were quickly snatched away from that immobile countenance.

As Carlisle summed her up to himself, he concluded that in normal conditions she was probably the apotheosis of all that was gracious, gentle, and sincere; and that, in his opinion, she could give cards and spades to Elizabeth Barrett Browning in the matter of love-making.

This question being settled, he gave his attention back to Abercrombie and found him listening to the letter in question which was being read out by the coroner.

It ran something like this—being a mass of semi-incoherent phrases rather than a finished composition:

You ask me to give you your freedom—ask for the greatest boon—and you offer me in return, what? Disgrace and ignominy—loneliness and desertion. Money! What do I care for money? Will that compensate for the low, sordid gestures of the divorce court? I, who have never known the shadow of unpleasant conditions or uncomfortable scenes. Shall my good name and yours be dragged in the mire for the public to jeer at? Yet you say, grant you divorce, as calmly as one would ask some slight, casual favour! You do not care for me, you never cared for me—why, I do not know—others have praised me, others have loved me, but you—never mind all that—the question is a direct one—you ask for divorce and I refuse to grant it. That is final.

Slowly Garrett read this strange epistle. Strange, because it was written in short paragraphs and was full of erasures, scratched-out words, and interlinear additions. Clearly it was a first rough draft of a letter and not the finished product.

"You recognize this document?" asked the coroner of his witness.

"No," Abercrombie said, but his voice faltered. "No, I never received such a communication. This is the first time I have seen or heard of it or of its contents."

"You acknowledge it is in the handwriting of your late wife?"

"I state that I am certain it is. I object to the use of the word acknowledge."

Carlisle scanned him closely. Surely his pride was his strongest characteristic. But how foolish of him to antagonize the coroner at this stage of the game.

"And you have no reason to think it was written to send or give to you?"

"I have every reason to think it was. To whom else could it be? But I repeat that it was never sent to me, nor any letter or note embodying a similar message."

Hugh's voice rang clear and strong now. It was impossible to doubt that he was telling the truth.

But the coroner was unimpressed.

"That is immaterial," he said shortly. "The writing here may not be a letter at all, or even the draft of a letter. It may well be merely a memorandum of what your wife planned to say to you, *viva voce*."

A flutter ran through the audience, and several heads

nodded involuntary acquiescence. For it was known to many that Eileen Abercrombie was in the habit of doing that very thing. If she had a speech to make at a club or other meeting, a page of rambling notes was her invariable way of remembering what she wanted to say. What more likely than that she should use this means to jot down the points she wished to make clear to her husband?

A sudden blankness spread over Hugh's face. It was quite clear that he hadn't thought of this. But after a momentary pause he said simply:

"True, that may be the case. May I know when and where that paper was found?"

"It was found last evening in Mrs. Abercrombie's writing desk."

"You searched her rooms?"

The words came out like an accusation. Carlisle could fairly feel the indignation of the man at what he deemed a sacrilege. But Carlisle read him better than Garrett did. The blunt-witted coroner saw only his witness's fear for himself and quickly wondered what other incriminating documents were in existence and whether his detectives had found them.

"Certainly," he said. "We shall doubtless search the whole house. Please understand, Mr. Abercrombie, that these things must follow the official routine. The matter under consideration is becoming a serious one, and we are in duty bound to spare no efforts to get at the truth. I must therefore question you further. Did your wife hold conversation with you that in any way

embodied the intent clearly indicated in this memorandum of points?"

"She did."

"Yet you told me there was no question of divorce between you."

"Don't quibble. I told you we never quarrelled. Mrs. Abercrombie told me quite frankly that she would not entertain the thought of a divorce."

"Then you had asked her to do so?"

"I had."

"For what reason?"

"Because I thought it would further the happiness and well-being of both of us if it could be brought about."

"Then you are——"

"You will pardon me, Mr. Coroner, if I remind you not to step beyond your official rights in your inquiries."

So gently was the reminder given that Carlisle was scarcely prepared for the icy gleam which shot from the speaker's deep gray-blue eyes at the exultant face of the coroner.

Everyone in the room who was clairvoyant or even intuitive felt sure that the interrupted sentence was to the effect of "Then you are interested in some other woman," or some intimation of that sort. And many of the listeners felt basely defrauded of their expected thrill.

Garrett bristled up and almost made an angry response, but a brief glance into the eyes that now bored into his made him change his mind and say a little limply, "Certainly, sir, certainly."

Then there was a brief whispered conference between Garrett and Kenneth Carlisle during which Hugh sat with a thoughtful, detached air that seemed to lift him out of and away from the present scene and seemingly cut him off from any connection with the inquest or its objective point.

Apparently he had no realization of where he was; he showed no trace of self-consciousness or embarrassment, and as his unseeing eyes roved idly about he took no notice of anything or anybody present, not even of Lorna Garth.

Nor did the strained attention of the audience rest on him. He was unsatisfactory as a study. They could make nothing out of that proud handsome face and that indifferent motionless figure. They turned their gaze to the well-known features of their own screen favourite, their adored Kenneth Carlisle, who, though fallen from his exalted pedestal, was still worth looking at and wondering about.

Maisie, however, stared straight at her stepfather.

So earnestly did she study him that Percy, ever fearful of what atrocious unconventionality the girl might cut up, watched her with care.

It was quite within the possibilities that Maisie would elect to "speak right out in meetin'," and Van Antwerp felt the reporters were getting the full worth of their money without being given anything of that sort to add to their notes.

But Maisie, save for her darting eyes, was very quiet. She looked at Hugh with a puzzled face rather than an

accusatory glance, and she drew a long sigh when his own eyes, travelling incessantly about, passed hers without so much as a communicative gleam.

The coroner, finishing his talk with Carlisle, of which no word reached the curious listeners, turned to Hugh Abercrombie and with a curt word dismissed him.

Imperturbable and simple of manner, Hugh rose and went over to Maisie and sat down beside her.

But immediately the coroner bade her take the witness stand, and with a rather pert nod of acquiescence Maisie complied.

The black chiffon frock she wore was not unbecoming, and her small, close-fitting black hat let only a few of her bronze-brown curls escape from its brim.

To the surprise of many, including herself, Garrett did not question her about her mother's illness or the circumstances of her death but took up the tale of the memorandum before him.

"Do you recognize this as your mother's handwriting?" he shot at her.

Dazed by the suddenness with which the paper was thrust at her, Maisie drew back and said sharply, "Don't pounce at me like that! I won't have it!"

Percy Van Antwerp looked more than ever anxious, but the matter was out of his hands now; he couldn't warn her to be careful by a glance, for she didn't look his way. She glared at the coroner, and though he was in a measure prepared for this termagant, he quailed a little.

"Answer, please," he managed to say with polite firmness, and Maisie answered:

"Yes, it is my mother's writing. Now, what are you going to do about it? And where did you get it? I suppose that Mercer egg dug it up from the secret pigeonholes of my mother's desk. But it doesn't mean a thing! You take it for truth? You think she meant all that? In a fly's eye! Why, my mother did that sort of stunt all the time. Reklect what Abie Lincoln said? Write out what you want to sling at somebody. Make it fierce! Slam 'em hard! Yeah, write it all down, like a letter, and then—then tear it up! That's the colossal idea. That's what my mother often did. Many's the time she wrote out what she meant to say to me by way of gentle reproof. 'Most burned up the paper, it did! But did she pass it on to her angel child? She did not! She followed the instructions of the good ole rail-splitter and tore it up. That's what she did! Now, that paper you're setting such store by is just blah. Roughage, that's all it is. Tie it outside. Oh, blow!"

Unable to stem the tide of Maisie's rapid locution, Garrett listened perforce, interested in spite of his desire to stop her.

It was a novel situation, a mere chit of a girl braving the police authorities with no indication of fear, and with the careless manner and language of the intrepid younger generation.

Abercrombie looked at her disinterestedly. He had long since ceased to heed her ebullitions. He had a dim sense that she was trying to be of help to him, but her meaning was vague and he didn't care much for help from such a source.

Van Antwerp was truly upset. How could Maisie make such a spectacle of herself? Graceful and sweet in her chic black gown, she spoiled the whole picture by her violent gestures and her impertinent, screwed-up little face. Even her naturally lovely voice became strident and raucous as she flung her torrent of words at the luckless Garrett.

But the coroner was not a fool. He listened carefully to the tirade and then put his finger on the important point.

"But," he said when an absolutely run-down Maisie paused for breath, "Mr. Abercrombie has stated that his wife did say to him the very things listed in the memorandum here."

He paused to let this sink in, and Maisie got her second wind.

"Nothing of the sort, old Fuddlehead! Your brain must be made of excelsior. My mother and father discussed a divorce 'cause everybody has one nowadays. They talked it over as they'd talk over getting a new car. But they concluded the game wasn't worth the candle, and they'd jog along together for the present, anyhow. Not that all this has any bearing on the matter of my mother's death"—Maisie's face was serious now—"but I wanted you to know before you went any farther with that useless bit of paper. Is there anything else you want to ask me?"

Garrett was strongly tempted to say no, for he feared another cataclysm of language. But there were some points to be settled.

"One or two things, perhaps," he said smoothly. "First, as a frequent visitor, naturally, to your mother's room, did you ever see in her possession any bottle or vial that you knew or believed to contain any preparation of mercury?"

Maisie looked thoughtful. All her madcap effects were gone; she was a charming, well-poised young woman, ready to help the investigation.

"I do seem to remember such a thing a few weeks ago," she said slowly. "I went to Mother's medicine chest for something, and I vaguely recall seeing a small box of tablets which was clearly marked, 'Bichloride of Mercury. Poison.' I didn't open the box; I only remember it because it seemed a strange thing to be there."

"You didn't open the box?"

"No, I did not."

"Then how did you know it held tablets? It might have contained powders."

Maisie exhibited no sign of chagrin but merely said carelessly, "Oh, I picked it up and shook it, and I could tell by the sound it held tablets. Or shoe buttons, maybe. I can't say positively."

"One more thing, Miss Abercrombie." Garrett was very suave now. "Has your father—your stepfather—shown, of late, any signs of being interested in or devoted to any lady other than his wife?"

Maisie stood up, her amber eyes growing dark and the red blood surging into her cheeks. Her small white hands clenched, and it could be easily seen she was

fighting hard to preserve her self-control. She conquered, and in the breathless silence her young, clear voice rang out a "No" that was so full of scorn and contempt that it seemed to sear the very atmosphere about her.

She gave the coroner one look that was such as one might cast on a noisome worm, and then she stepped daintily and softly away and resumed her seat next to Hugh Abercrombie.

The wisdom of Coroner Garrett told him to pay no evident heed to the indignities that this tempestuous witness had offered him. He looked at his papers a moment and then summoned Miss Mercer.

The secretary was a bit nervous but answered the queries definitely.

No, she had never seen any box of tablets marked poison in Mrs. Abercrombie's rooms. No, she knew nothing of any unpleasantness between the husband and wife. Yes, she was aware of Mrs. Abercrombie's habit of jotting down notes of any conversation she expected to take part in, whether a public speech or a private confab.

Asked particularly as to Mrs. Abercrombie's illnesses during the past week she said that some several times the lady had complained of pain and discomfort and had eaten practically nothing or very little of the simplest food since the day of the lawn tea.

"You think, then, Miss Mercer, that the poison was taken into Mrs. Abercrombie's system the day of the tea party?"

"It would seem so, since she had her first attack of illness that afternoon."

"Was she a lady with whom you would associate the idea of suicide?"

"Most positively not. She was one of the happiest human beings I have ever met. She had plans for the immediate future that filled her mind with pleasant thoughts and anticipations. She was planning several delightful parties and was deeply interested in their details. Surely she never would dream of suicide!"

"And as to accident?"

"That I can't say. So far as I know there was no poison within her reach. But though I have occasionally gone to the medicine cabinet for some simple remedy I couldn't attempt to catalogue it. There are many boxes and bottles in it of whose contents I have no idea."

"You were closely associated with the lady. In your opinion and from what you necessarily observed, do you think it likely that the fatal dose was taken on the Thursday of last week, and that it reached its climax and resulted in the lady's death on Monday night or, rather, early Tuesday morning?"

"So far as I am familiar with the circumstances, I have no choice but to assume that is the case."

Miss Mercer spoke with a prim precision, as if carefully weighing her words and determined not to commit herself beyond the probabilities.

"You are desirous of leaving this house, Miss Mercer? Of giving up your position here?"

"I should like to do so at the convenience of the family. I think that is a matter for their decision."

"To your knowledge, Miss Mercer, was the late Mrs. Abercrombie in the habit of using spirituous liquors?"

"If by using them you mean drinking them frequently, most certainly not. But on occasion, especially after any exertion or any tiresome affair, Mrs. Abercrombie might refresh herself with a Scotch highball or a cocktail."

"And on the afternoon of the tea were such drinks served in the tea house?"

"I daresay," said Miss Mercer nonchalantly, "though I cannot speak from observation. I noticed nothing of the sort when I was in there."

"I think it's best to explain the trend of my inquiry," Garrett said. "It has become fairly evident that the drink taken by Mrs. Abercrombie, which contained poison, was taken that afternoon in the tea house after the guests had departed. This, according to your statements, would not be unusual."

"No," said Miss Mercer, "that might easily have happened. But why do you assume it?"

"Miss Abercrombie stopped in the tea house for a moment when there was no one there but her mother, and she states that her mother was then drinking a highball or other beverage from one of the silver cups used that day for the first time. Owing to a silver cup being used instead of a glass, it was not possible to see the colour or appearance of the drink. Therefore we can suspect that that drink contained the bichloride of

mercury. This would discolour the whisky and soda but could not be seen through the silver."

"But," said Miss Mercer intelligently, "assuming for the moment the drink was given her by someone else with evil intent, would not the poison render it so unpalatable as to restrain her from drinking it at all?"

"I am told not," Garrett replied gravely. "I am advised by the doctors that the taste of the poison would be so disguised by the spirit as to be practically unobservable."

"Then it is quite possible that she drank the poison at that time. But I can see no reason for assuming it was given her by another hand than her own."

Garrett was not in the habit of letting his witnesses express their own opinions to quite such an extent, but as Miss Mercer was helping him to bring out the very points he wanted to drive home he accepted her remarks.

"There are reasons for thinking that," he said, and dismissing her a little hastily he called the butler, Fetter, to the stand.

"You went to the tea house Thursday afternoon after the party was over and found Mrs. Abercrombie there alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"What was she doing?"

"Nothing. She sat in a chair with an expression of pain on her face."

"She had been drinking something?"

"Yes, sir, a Scotch highball."

"How do you know it was that?"

"The empty glass was on the table beside her. A siphon of soda stood there, too, and there was nothing else about to drink."

"Were there other glasses there?"

"Oh, yes, several. Cups and glasses and plates were all about the room. Many people had been served at the very last, and we had not yet been able to get all cleared away."

"Now, Fetter, think carefully. Had you any way of knowing how much or how little whisky Mrs. Abercrombie had used in her highball?"

"I had, sir. When she poured it out, she must have opened a fresh bottle, for there was none left in the bottle last used. Also, when I looked at the bottle, I saw that a very large drink had been taken from it. I was amazed, for Mrs. Abercrombie, while taking a highball now and then, took always an exceedingly small portion of spirits and a large dash of soda water. I couldn't understand it, sir, and do not now. For I called Corinne and we helped Mrs. Abercrombie over to the house and up to her room, and the lady was suffering from something quite different from an overdose of whisky."

"Might it be that two drinks were taken from that bottle, and that someone drank with Mrs. Abercrombie?"

"That's the way I look at it, sir. If some man was in there with her and poured the drinks, it would ex-

plain the amount gone from that fresh bottle of Scotch."

"It can't be blamed on the quality of the whisky?"

"No, sir. All spirits used in this house are carefully tested first."

"That will do, Fetter. You may go."

And then, without further inquiry or comment, the coroner adjourned the inquest for two weeks in order to collect further evidence.

## CHAPTER VIII

### *Playing a Murder Game*

THE family and their friends filed out, the servants followed, and then the audience was dismissed.

For the most part the curiosity seekers were disappointed. They wanted the matter cleared up then and there and saw no reason why it shouldn't be.

Kenneth Carlisle, however, was pleased at the delay. It would give him time to make his own investigations in his own way.

He had shared the limelight with the Abercrombies that day. His well-known face was unmistakable, though he tried his best to look more like an ordinary civilian and less like a screen celebrity.

His manner was as quiet and dignified as Hugh's own, and he paid no attention to the admiring looks and even more definite advances from the girls and women present.

He passed rapidly through the crowd and disappeared into a small reception room that he had quickly chosen for his office.

Downing joined him there, and the two detectives prepared to take up the case in earnest.

They were a decided contrast, these two investiga-

tors, for Downing was a commonplace-looking man, stockily built and carelessly dressed; while Carlisle, a veritable glass of fashion, yet without any conspicuous effects, had the appearance of being of aristocratic lineage at least as noble as the Vere de Veres.

This appearance was not by right of birth or breeding but the result of his histrionic career in which he had almost invariably portrayed characters of high degree and had learned the proper gestures. He could have acted equally well as a middle-class man or a denizen of the underworld had he chosen to do so.

He fell into an armchair and motioned Downing to another.

"Now for it," he began. "That farce of an inquest is over, and we can set to work."

"A necessary evil, though," quoth Downing placidly, "we learned a lot, to my way of thinking, from Garrett's performance."

"Yes. We could have dug it all up ourselves, but, as you say, it's helpful. Now, to be systematic, we want to find out first of all as to the time of the lady's death, the weapon, and the motive."

"You're playing a murder game, then?"

"Yes," Carlisle spoke seriously, "because it was a murder. That woman never killed herself in those conditions and circumstances. The drink she was taking when her daughter saw her was the fatal draught, and its effects, both then and later, caused her death."

"Yes, I agree. Then you have the weapon."

"Practically, yes. But we must learn more about it.

That ought to be easy. Now, can we feel sure that it was at that time that the poison was administered? I think we can, for up to that moment guests were about, and so far as we have learned Mrs. Abercrombie was in her usual health and spirits. Then she took the highball by herself or from the hand of somebody else, and almost immediately afterward she had an illness which, according to Dr. Garth, was the necessary effect of that poison. I think we must assume that to be the truth. Remains then the question as to whether she did provide the poison or whether someone else did. I'm going on the assumption that someone else did."

"And maybe accuse an innocent person."

"That's up to us. We must discover whether the person or persons we accuse are guilty or not. That's what we're here for. If we say suicide and let it go at that, we're not doing our duty."

"Guess you're right. Who's your suspect?"

"Downing, I want to give this thing an honest handling. I want to look the situation squarely in the face, and stare it out of countenance. Now, the obvious suspect is Hugh Abercrombie. Don't tell me it's impossible to connect him with a crime, that he doesn't look like a criminal, that he is incapable of such a deed, and all that. I know it. But he is the one with the biggest claim to motive and opportunity, and he must be investigated."

"You're ascribing motive to him because you've heard some gossip about the Garth girl."

"Isn't he in love with the Garth girl?"

"How do I know? People say so, but gossip is not always true. And granting that he is, he isn't the sort of man to commit murder to get his freedom."

"Nothing so clearly shows ignorance of the study of human nature as to say that. Any man is the sort of man to commit murder, given sufficient motive. There is what is called the criminal class, but they are a brutal type. There are what may be called criminal features, but they are largely theoretical. Aside from all that, a desperate crime may be committed by a desperate man who is far removed from a criminal class or type. These instances are only too common. What are the motives for murder? There are but three; they include all others. They are lucre, liquor, and lust. Money comes first, but that doesn't figure in this case. There is no question of money involved. Nor is liquor possible, by which I mean a crime committed when the perpetrator is drunk. But lust is one of the strongest motives. I don't use that word in any bestial sense. It may represent the highest type of intellectual, even spiritual, love between two fine natures. In this instance, it probably does. I saw Miss Garth to-day, and I think she is a rare and a high-minded woman. I quite agree with you that it is most unlikely that Hugh Abercrombie should commit a crime to be free to win her, but it is a possibility and it must be looked into. If he is innocent, I feel sure he can be proved so."

"But you've so little to go on. A bit of rumour connecting their two names—that isn't evidence."

Carlisle looked at him a moment, and there was a touch of sadness in his voice as he went on:

"I'm putting all my cards on the table, Downing. We're both on the Force, we are working together, and I'm not the sort of story-book detective who wants to keep his findings to himself. I have evidence."

And then he told in full detail the scene he had witnessed between Hugh Abercrombie and Lorna Garth under the big maple tree.

"Gosh!" observed Downing, astounded at the revelation.

"Where there is smoke there is apt to be fire," said Carlisle. "When you hear two names coupled, there is something going on between those two people. Entirely innocent friends are not talked about."

"You've knocked me endways," went on Downing. "How the devil did you chance on them at that critical moment?"

"I didn't. They chanced on me. I imagine it wasn't the first time they met there when Abercrombie went out for a stroll round the grounds."

"But they said it must be the last?"

"They said so, yes. Now, Downing, our work is cut out for us. It is our duty to find out the exact state of affairs. I do not feel guilty at that bit of eavesdropping, for it's all in the day's work, and if they are innocent of any participation in this crime, they'll never know I saw them that night, and my knowledge won't hurt them."

"No. But it begins to look to me as if the man must

be guilty. He had asked his wife to divorce him. She had refused positively. He was desperate, and so he took the easiest way out."

"You can't sum it up like that. Supposing him as innocent as a lamb, those two might well meet for a few moments and then part for the present, knowing that would be the prudent thing to do. No, we can't fix it on him yet. But he had a motive, that we may be sure of. Now as to opportunity. We must find out where he was at six-thirty that afternoon. I mean last Thursday afternoon. That's the fatal hour—not the hour she died. The daughter says she was in the tea house at six-thirty and her mother was alone there sipping a highball. Therefore, whoever put the poison in that drink for her had left the scene only a few moments previously. That ought not to be a hard matter to trace. Surely we can find out from servants or guests who was there last with Mrs. Abercrombie. Also, we must learn the husband's whereabouts at the time."

"You're a systematic chap, Mr. Carlisle. It's a pleasure to work with you and a liberal education as well."

"Oh, I'm easy to get along with if you let me have my own way. I'm not a spectacular sort; I've had enough of the spectacular in my life. I fear I'm not even a brilliant deducer, but I'm all for straight-ahead plodding and for sticking to it like a puppy to a root. I think I'll have a puppy at a root on my coat of arms when I set up such a thing. Now, you see, that poison was probably given to the lady in that highball a

short time before six-thirty. A very short time before, for the guests and servants were in the tea house until nearly that time. It is possible the poisoner returned, possible he was lurking about when Maisie came, and reappeared after Maisie left. Then, having satisfied himself that his victim had taken or was taking the poison, he disappeared, and soon after the butler came and the trouble began."

"Then you fix the time and the place right then and there?"

"I do, though of course I may be mistaken."

"It gives a starting point to work from."

"Just that. We must get all possible information as to the doings of everybody at that time."

"I don't like the theory that the lady opened the new bottle of Scotch. It doesn't seem to be quite in the picture."

"I agree with you, that's why I deduce the poisoner there. He opened the bottle and probably poured drinks for them both. That can't be proved because all glasses were swept away by the servants, and of course they took no notice of their position on the table or anything of that sort. Nor can we set the time to the minute. The servants would know only approximately, and Maisie may be inaccurate. But there were guests and servants there until well after six, and Fetter found the lady ill there some time before seven, so the time is pretty certain."

"What about clues?"

"Well, what about them?"

"I mean, don't you expect to find some in the tea house or somewhere?"

"Clues are kittle cattle. I'm not at all partial to a dropped handkerchief or glove. I don't hope to find a shred of the criminal's clothing or a butt of his initialled cigarette. In fact, the clues I consider of value are the clues that aren't there. The clues that the criminal doesn't leave."

"Ah, that's more like it! Now you are getting cryptic and mystifying. Good!"

Carlisle laughed. "Not cryptic—only progressive. I'll explain. I have a notion our criminal is a clever sort, and I can't help thinking he's too smart to leave material clues about unless they are some he might put there purposely for us to find. But he may defeat his own intent and give himself away by the lack of real clues he leaves behind him."

"I don't quite get you, but you seem to know what you're talking about."

"You bet I do. Hello, who's coming to bother us?"

A knock at the door was followed by the entrance of Van Antwerp.

"May I come in?" he said, stepping inside. "It's this way, Ken. Hugh wants to go to New York to see about the funeral arrangements, select the casket, and all that. And he says if you want to see him for anything, could you do so now so he can go along."

"But of course," Carlisle answered. "I say, Van, I don't want to put the man through a grilling. He's probably just about all in, anyway."

"Up to you," Percy said, and Downing interrupted.

"I think you'd better see him, Mr. Carlisle," he advised. "There are some things he might be able to tell you."

"All right, then. Where is he, Perc?"

"In his study, the room back of the library."

Carlisle knew the way and went at once. He didn't want Downing with him and didn't ask him, so he stayed behind.

"Good man," said Van Antwerp, nodding after the departing figure of Carlisle.

"Fine. Splendid ideas and methods, but a lot inexperienced. He'll make a great detective some day, but he has a bit to learn."

"Yet they trust him with this important case."

"Oh, well, I'm back of him," and Downing looked as if he thought himself a rock of Gibraltar. "I'll trip him up if he goes too far in a wrong direction."

Inwardly amused at this attitude, Percy only said, "I've known him for years; I rather think he knows what he's about."

"Where were you, Mr. Van Antwerp, at the time Mrs. Abercrombie was alone in the tea house?"

"I had gone home, back to the inn. I had been with Miss Abercrombie, and we had had tea out on the grounds. She dismissed me, saying she had to go in and dress for dinner. She bade me hurry home and dress and return as soon as I could."

"Did you?"

"Yes. I was back here an hour later and stayed to

dinner and all evening. Mrs. Abercrombie was not at the dinner table, but as Maisie said she was indisposed after the tea, we all thought nothing strange of it."

"Supposing there to have been foul play, Mr. Van Antwerp, who do you think could have done it?"

"That's a big question, Downing, and with you two worth-while detectives on the job you can hardly expect me to answer it conclusively. Nor can I suppose it was foul play, by which I suppose you mean murder. Who in the world could have any reason for killing that lovely lady?"

"There might be such."

"There might be," Van Antwerp agreed gravely. "It is of course possible. And if so, I hope and trust you'll discover the villain and see that he gets all that's coming to him."

Meantime, Carlisle reached the study and went in to find Abercrombie there and Eric Redmayne with him.

The detective suddenly recalled that it was these two men in this same room that he had seen through the window on Tuesday evening, the night before.

Now Kenneth Carlisle often found it suited his book not to talk. And his long experience in registering his meaning on his face aided him in this course.

So now his speaking countenance made greeting by a grave but kindly smile and a flash of sympathy from his dark eyes.

Redmayne held a chair for him, and Carlisle sat down, with one of his best screen gestures.

His whole manner was a bit suggestive of his film work,

for he wanted to distract the attention of these two men from his mental processes, and he knew how a picture attracts the mind.

He accepted a cigarette and lighted it with the affected elegance he used before the camera, and he was rewarded by seeing both his auditors look at him interestedly.

"You wanted to see me, Mr. Abercrombie?" he said at last, and his pleasant, low voice fell kindly on the ear of the master of the house.

"I thought perhaps you wanted to see me," was the quiet response. "I want to go to town on some errands, and Mr. Redmayne will go with me. So I thought if you desired an interview we could have it right now."

Carlisle was drawn greatly toward this sorrowful-looking man. He did feel it was his duty to investigate the possibilities of his implication in the matter of his wife's death, but he couldn't feel, as yet, that Abercrombie was guilty.

"My dear sir," he responded, "I do want to ask you a few questions. Or, rather, I feel it my duty to do so. Is it your wish to talk before Mr. Redmayne, or would you prefer to be alone with me?"

Hugh hesitated, but it was plain to be seen that his partner had no intention of leaving the room unless he was directed to do so.

Then Abercrombie's head was flung up with that characteristic gesture of his, and he said proudly: "It really makes no difference. I have no secrets from my partner, and I have nothing to conceal."

But Carlisle wasn't pleased with this arrangement, and he said, "I have no doubt of that, but I feel this to be a privileged communication, and if I may, I'm going to ask Mr. Redmayne to leave us to ourselves for a few moments."

Carlisle's courteous manner and dulcet voice made it extremely hard to disobey him, and under the influence of the detective's urbane but compelling glance Eric Redmayne rose and passed out of the room.

Whereupon, Kenneth Carlisle calmly turned the key in the door after him and resumed his seat.

"Pardon me, Mr. Abercrombie," he said, dropping entirely his stagey manner and speaking earnestly and as man to man, "but I find myself obliged to ask you some very personal questions, and I feel sure it is better to have no third person present."

Abercrombie's fine face clouded, he drummed nervously on the table with his finger tips, and then after taking a moment to pull himself together, he spoke clearly and steadily:

"You are within your rights, Mr. Carlisle, in probing into my secrets?"

Not a little astounded and also conscious of a feeling of admiration for one who could so valiantly take the bull by the horns Carlisle replied:

"I think so. If you feel I overstep you can decline to answer."

"To decline to answer is not infrequently an answer in itself."

"Very true, Mr. Abercrombie. And I shall endeavour not to frame my questions in such a way that they will prove a snare."

"Go on, then," said the other wearily. "Am I suspected of killing my wife?"

"I do not think you are, sir, but I tell you frankly that you probably will be unless you give free and frank explanations when they are asked for."

"That I may do, and I may not. You are to do this asking?"

"At the moment, yes. To begin, do you think that Mrs. Abercrombie died as the result of poisoning by someone other than herself?"

"Good heavens, man, how do I know? I can't think it possible, and yet I can't believe she killed herself. As I have testified, I think there was some mistake—some accident responsible for her death. I certainly can't think anyone poisoned her drink in the tea house that day. Intentionally, I mean."

"Yet circumstances point to that. You wanted a divorce, Mr. Abercrombie; you did not want to live with your wife any longer. That, you must admit, was proved at the inquest. Why did you want a separation?"

Hugh's cold pride returned to his face.

"In my opinion," he answered quietly, "we would both have been happier living apart. We were not congenial, not at all of the same tastes or temperament, and I hoped she would see it as I did—that we would be better off in every way if we could obtain a divorce. It is not an unheard-of proceeding."

"Not at all. And you are doubtless right. At least, regarding yourself. But Mrs. Abercrombie did not want a divorce?"

"She did not. She was very positive on that point, and when we had our discussion and I found her so positive, I gave up the idea of it entirely. That is all there was to that subject."

"And you had no other reason for wanting that divorce but to further the happiness of you and your wife? There was no third person whose happiness you had in mind?"

"I see you have heard what I suppose is common report. You have doubtless heard that I have an affair—that is probably the term they would use—with Miss Garth."

"Yes, I have heard rumours or rather statements to that effect."

"The rumours are right. The statements most likely were wrong. Miss Garth has honoured me with a friendship that is of a nature that few could understand. I do not mean the commonplace relation sometimes called Platonic; I mean a high, a spiritual affection that brings to me no feeling of shame or wrongdoing. That it would bring to the gossipping crowd such feelings disturbs me not at all. The lady is of too fine and glorious a nature to be harmed by anything the common populace could say. She is above and beyond a thought or a care for such comment or criticism. She is exalted—she is not of the earth—earthy. Yet I know all this is meaningless to you."

"Not at all, Mr. Abercrombie," said Carlisle sincerely. "I do understand. I do know what you mean by such a love, such a spiritual union. I might not have understood so well, but I saw the lady this morning, and I know she is all that you represent her to be."

Hugh turned a look of surprise on the speaker. His face lighted up as with a glad recognition of the sympathy offered.

Carlisle studied him. He was childlike in his gladness, but back of it all was a deep, grave sorrow. More, there was trouble, terrible fierce trouble, that fairly shouted from his hollow eyes.

"Did Mrs. Abercrombie know of this?" he said gently.

"She suspected it of late. You see, for years Miss Garth and I have known of it. We have known it was hopeless, but the joy of it compensated for the sorrow. We have done no wrong. We have met alone but a few times. We have written notes, letters, but—well, we couldn't help that."

Carlisle almost smiled at this naïve revelation.

"And Miss Garth was satisfied to let it go on like that?"

"Satisfied is not the right word. We had to let it go on like that. What else could we do? We loved one another as few people on this earth have been capable of loving. We seldom met, we wrote but infrequently, yet we were powerless to break it off entirely. I am frank with you, Mr. Carlisle, because I know you are in charge of this matter, and I know you will hear

of this affair from all sorts and conditions of men. So I prefer that you get it at first hand from myself. I am not afraid of your revealing our secret except as it comes in line of your duty. And that's what I want to assure you. It cannot come in the line of your duty, for I did not kill my wife. You may think I did, but I did not. So I think I am right in telling you this, and you will be right if you believe me."

The heart of Kenneth Carlisle went out to this straightforward, plain-spoken man, and if he didn't quite believe in his innocence, he most assuredly was inclined to reserve judgment until he could learn more of the facts of the case.

"I thank you for your confidence," he said at last. "I understand and appreciate the difficult position you are in, and I sincerely hope it will all be cleared up soon. But might not the fact that Mrs. Abercrombie realized your love for another woman and your wish to be divorced have moved her to make way with herself?"

"Never! That would be farthest from her nature. She was angered by the discovery, not sorrowful. She was a strong, fine character, but tempestuous when roused to anger. No, she would have been far more likely to kill Miss Garth than to kill herself. Usually of an even, happy nature, when she was displeased her wrath was almost uncontrollable."

"She and Miss Garth were friends outwardly?"

"Oh, yes. And Miss Garth had no unfriendly feelings toward her. She knew Eileen was my wife, and she accepted the fact. It didn't make her antagonistic toward

Mrs. Abercrombie. I doubt if you do understand. It was simply a case beyond our powers to prevent or to amend. We could do nothing but wait for the day when I should be freed of Eileen. And now it has come!" He breathed the last word with a look af awe, a seeming view of an apocalypse.

"Be careful how you make remarks like that, Mr. Abercrombie," Carlisle said, looking him in the face. "You know, you must know, you are watched and listened to by inquisitive eyes and ears. Pray be careful, or you will bring disaster not only on yourself but on those you love. Does your daughter know of this matter?"

"Maisie? Oh, no, the child has no idea of it."

## CHAPTER IX

### *An Exalted Love Affair*

"WHAT is it the child doesn't know?" said a high, lilting voice, apparently from nowhere.

"That's Maisie," Hugh said, quite unruffled. "She's at the keyhole; it's a favourite trick of hers."

Usually unmoved by interruptions, Carlisle felt annoyed at this, and rising quickly he flung the door open.

Maisie, on her knees, nearly fell into the room but quickly righted herself and gave the door opener a reproachful glance, which quickly changed to a look of rapt adoration.

"How gorgeous you are!" she exclaimed. "Oh, how could you leave the movies to become a horrid old detective?"

Abercrombie regarded her calmly. He had long since ceased to correct Maisie's manners or lack of manners.

"Tell me, Dad," she urged, turning from Carlisle. "What is it that I don't know? Surely you're not ostrich enough to think you and Lorna can hide your heads in the sand!"

"You know, then?" He spoke wearily, as if beginning to realize that everybody knew, now.

"Of course. Who doesn't. But I know, too, that you

can't help it." She went over to him and sat on the arm of his chair.

Her face became gentle and sweet, and Carlisle suddenly recognized her beauty and charm. Surely she had inherited some of her mother's personal magnetism. She ran her fingers through Hugh's soft, thick hair and looked at him pityingly.

"Don't you dare think, Mr. Kenneth Carlisle," she burst forth suddenly, "that this friendship of my father and Miss Garth is any horrid, common liaison! It's nothing of the sort. It's spiritual, it's on a higher plane, it's something you know nothing about, something you couldn't possibly understand! Ordinary minds can't grasp it."

"Maisie!" exclaimed Abercrombie, "for heaven's sake, hush! Don't talk like that!"

"Why not? If I sit still and say nothing, first thing you know they'll be saying you killed my mother! They're saying it now! I've heard it hinted myself. That snake in the grass, Mercer, believes it or pretends to. More likely she did it herself! Nothing on earth—nothing, Bobbo—will ever make *me* believe you did it —you or Lorna, either!"

Hugh Abercrombie turned very white, and his eyes blazed for a moment. Then they dulled and seemed to sink deeper back in his head.

With a determined shrug of his shoulders he pulled himself together and said to Carlisle:

"Tell me the truth, please. Are they accusing me already? And have they mentioned Miss Garth's name?"

Maisie began to speak, but he stopped her, saying:

"I asked Mr. Carlisle."

"I think there are rumours," Carlisle said frankly and truthfully. "But there are always rumours of all sorts. Try to pay no attention to them. Be advised by me, Mr. Abercrombie, and tell me the truth without reservation. Then we will know where we stand."

"I can't," said Hugh in a dull, far-away voice. "I'm afraid to."

"Bobbo!" cried the girl, "you don't know what fear is!"

"For myself, no." Then suddenly realizing that he had made an admission he became silent and refused to say anything more.

"Forget it, Mr. Carlisle," Maisie said, looking at him beseechingly. "He's—he's not entirely responsible. I mean, he's so bothered and badgered about this thing, he can't think straight. Now, Bobbo, be still and let me talk. You're on the wrong tack, Mr. Carlisle. This man here couldn't kill a fly let alone a human being. Don't think I don't want my mother's death avenged. Don't think I don't want her murderer caught! I do. But he isn't Hugh Abercrombie."

"Are you sure your mother was murdered, Miss Maisie?"

She looked serious and deeply troubled.

"No, I'm not. And I did think it was an accident until the inquest came off. That made me realize the situation. And I know who did it; it was that secretary of hers, Maude Mercer."

"Stop, Maisie!" Abercrombie spoke very sternly now. "You've no right to make such an assertion. It's absurd to accuse Miss Mercer. She has always been a good and faithful friend to us all."

"Oh, she has, has she? That's all you know about it, old dear. Now, Mr. Kenneth Carlisle, you needn't take my word for it but just you open your eyes and look around. If your eyes don't light on Friend Secretary, it'll prove you've a bad case of mental myopia. Oh, I know she pretended to be a big friend of my mother's, do anything for her, sell her crutches to pay her rent, and all that. But it was faked friendship. Hunt through her hand luggage and I'll bet you find bichloride of mercury or whatever the stuff was."

"You take your mother's death serenely, Miss Abercrombie."

Maisie gave him a look of scorn that would have seared a man less used to observation.

"You think so? And I thought you had gumption. I don't wear all my feelings on my sleeve."

Her lip quivered, and turning to Abercrombie—she was still on the arm of his chair—she buried her head on his shoulder and broke into uncontrollable sobs.

"Better leave us for the present," Hugh said, glancing at Carlisle over the head of the tumultuous little figure in his arms. "She meant it all right; she loved her mother dearly, and she is fond of me, too. I'll see you again later."

As Carlisle opened the door to depart, he found Van Antwerp patrolling the hall outside.

"Maisie in there?" he queried, and Carlisle nodded.

"She's having a little sobfest," he said. "Use your own judgment about going in."

"Who's with her?"

"Mr. Abercrombie."

"Guess I'll keep out, then. Hugh loves me but not as a son-in-law."

"Why not?"

"Thinks I'm too old for Maisie."

"You are."

"Yes, I know it. But assorted ages run in the family. Oh, it will come out all right. But this is no time to plead my cause."

"I should say not. Come along with me for a few minutes. You know more about the house rules here than I do. Would I be let to search the rooms without kicking up a bobbery, do you think?"

"Lord, I don't know. But isn't it your right of way to do that without question?"

"I suppose Downing would say so. But I hate to bung in if they're going to resent it."

"What rooms do you want to tackle?"

'Pretty much all of them. Mr. and Mrs. Abercrombie's, principally, and the secretary's and the daughter's and the guests'. And some of the living rooms."

"You've omitted the attics."

"It has to be done, Perc. You don't seem to realize I have a duty to perform. An experienced detective would be at it already. But I'm a raw hand, after all, and I hate to intrude. I hoped you'd scout around and let me into

a room here or there when the tenant was out of it. I'd be mighty swift of motion."

"I can do that, Ken, but wouldn't it be better to tell them frankly that it's your duty and then forge ahead?"

"Maybe. Tell you what, you go into the library and hold Mr. Abercrombie and the girl there while I do up their rooms. And I'll tackle Mrs. Abercrombie's at the same time. I don't want to make a thorough search. That isn't my way. I'm no magnifying-glass sleuth. I only want a general look about."

"Can't promise all you ask, but I'll go into the library, and I'll engage those two in conversation as long as I can hold them in a natural and unsuspicious way."

"Fine. Go ahead."

Without another word, Carlisle started for the stairs and went at once to Hugh Abercrombie's room, for he had already ascertained the positions of the bedrooms.

He entered the big, pleasant room with no attempt at stealth or slyness, and closing the door behind him he looked around.

All was in order, the well-kept master's bedroom of a country house. Fresh flowers were in the vases, and the September breeze swayed the organdie curtains.

After a short but comprehensive study of the place Carlisle went to the chiffonier and felt under a pile of folded handkerchiefs.

He brought out a small snapshot photograph which the briefest glance told him was Lorna Garth.

Running true to form, he said to himself, with a little

smile. Why do all men think that beneath a pile of handkerchiefs is as safe as a bank vault!

He put the picture carefully back where he found it and next looked over the contents of the small writing desk that stood by the windows.

A quick shuffle of the more prominent papers showed him nothing of interest, and he poked in the pigeonholes.

Probably a secret drawer, he mused. No time to hunt for that now, though this shallow niche hints at something behind it.

And sure enough, a pigeonhole of far less depth than its neighbours proved to have a spring in its top, which, being pressed, pushed out a partition and revealed a small cubby.

In this lay some five or six letters in feminine handwriting.

They were worn as with frequent readings, and unhesitatingly Kenneth Carlisle glanced through the one on top.

It was a joy, Beloved, to see you across the room at the musicale to-night. Your dear face looked careworn, but as your eyes met mine you seemed transfigured, and I could scarcely keep from running over to you. I had to turn my own eyes away lest someone see my happiness at sight of you. Oh, Hugh, my own, my other self, it is cruel, cruel that we may not be happy. Yet I know now there is no hope—none. Eileen is like a rock. A beautiful, hard, shiny rock. She will never give you your freedom. That I know. So, my Beloved, we must submit to our fate, must live forever in this miserable state of hungry longing, of sheer heart starvation. Can we live this way? But why ask—we must, we have to—unless . . . Oh, Hugh—unless . . . No, I cannot write it. I must not write more. I am in desperate mood to-night. To see you there, just across the room, and yet

know I must not go near you, nor let you come near me. It is heart-breaking, yet it is hopeless—we are helpless in the toils of Fate. Good-night, Dear Heart. I go to dream of you. Not sleeping dreams, but waking dreams, that I can fashion as I will, and that, one and all, show fair pictures of the happiness that we dare not speak of, dare not write of, and can only dream. Heaven bless you, dear one, and give you strength to carry on, brave and strong, as you always are. I, too, am brave and strong, but only because I have to be. Would I could lay down my spear and shield, fling off my armour, and run, a weak, helpless woman, to your protecting arms. But that may not be. Our fate is to brave the world with smiling faces and indifferent air. And we can do it. Our strength is as the strength of ten because our hearts are pure. Thank heaven we can say that, in God's truth. Oh, Hugh, if only . . . But I must not say it. I must not say any more, lest I say more than I ought. Good-night, my Best Beloved. I shall be at the tea on Thursday, but don't speak to me beyond a nod of greeting. Always and forever, your very own Lorna.

When he had finished, Carlisle stood still for a moment, gazing at the little packet of letters. Not a dozen all told, yet he felt that was all she had ever written him.

With no guilty feeling but with a deeply reverent touch he returned the lot to the secret drawer and closed it softly.

He had no need to copy the letter. His photographic memory preserved most of it, all of the necessary bits, and he knew the other letters could tell him no more than this one had told him. He was not quite sure what she had so determinedly refrained from saying, but he could guess.

Doubtless that was the last letter she had written. A day or two before the tea. And she had forbidden him

to speak to her at the tea. Had he obeyed? Or had Eileen intercepted them and had . . . But speculation was fruitless and, too, he had other business.

With a sigh he looked carelessly about. He stepped into the dressing room and bathroom. He gave a casual glance around. Downing would do the spade work here. He was hunting higher game than empty bottles bearing poison labels.

As he had said, he drew his inferences from clues that were not left behind rather than from those that were.

If he should find an empty poison bottle in this medicine cabinet, he would feel sure of Hugh's innocence. It would have been put there by somebody else. If Abercrombie had killed his wife, he would not leave evidence for detectives to find.

A swift survey of the tidy medicine chest showed no suspicious-looking bottles, and Carlisle sighed as he closed its door. Perhaps it was Hugh, after all.

Perhaps Lorna . . . Her father was a doctor . . . Faugh. Carlisle turned away as from a nauseous smell.

He went through the short passage that led to Eileen's bedroom.

A beautiful apartment met his eye. It was in perfect order, the bed made and the pillows of the chaise longue smoothed into place.

Yet he noticed at once the toilet table was not tidied, and the dresser had odds and ends of feminine adornment scattered on its top.

Of course, he decided, Downing had forbidden any touching of the appointments until thorough search

could be made. The body had been removed, but all else was left for investigation.

Straight to the boudoir, the next room, he went, and took a seat at the charming French escritoire that held Eileen's papers.

A moment sufficed to discover the secret drawer here, and eagerly Carlisle pulled it open. Few secret locks baffled him, and this was a simple affair.

The first thing he saw was a beautiful picture of a little girl perhaps eight or nine years old. At once he knew it was not Maisie; it was too old-fashioned of dress. Also, the features were unmistakable. It was Lorna Garth.

Why, he wondered, was it in Eileen's desk?

Then he understood.

On the back was written in Hugh's fine, cramped hand:

"Child of the pure, unclouded brow."

Of course. Lorna had given it to Hugh, who had treasured it as a hallowed souvenir. Eileen, jealous, had searched her husband's desk and had found it and kept it.

What an easily read human document it all was. And what a tragic, pitiful case.

Beautiful, charming Eileen, full of life and vivacity, could not hold her junior husband against the charm of this girl, this contemporary of his, this nature that called to his own, that responded to his very soul. What woman can compete with one fifteen years younger? Especially when the younger one is a perfect woman, nobly planned.

Eileen was a power, a magnet, a queen, but Lorna was a goddess.

The child picture was exquisitely lovely; the face seemed to bear a shy promise of the glory that was to come with the years. A promise that had been fulfilled, Carlisle knew, and he felt a pang at thought of what that achieved beauty had meant to Eileen.

Her own great and fine nature, as it had been portrayed to him, was the very one to resent intrusion of another fine nature.

Carlisle didn't need Van Antwerp's so-called psychoanalysis to read this tale of marital infelicity, this demonstration of the eternal triangle.

Under the picture, in the same drawer, was a small volume of poems. Its binding was worn, and it had evidently been read and loved.

Carlisle glanced at the flyleaf, where Lorna had written this inscription:

"This little book of Love Poems I give to You who are my Poem, and to You who are my Love."

At one page the book fell open, as if at a favourite. He read:

> Even now the fragrant darkness of her hair
> Had brushed my cheek; and once, in passing by,
> Her hand upon my hand lay tranquilly:
> What things unspoken trembled in the air!
>
> Always I know, how little severs me
> From mine heart's country, that is yet so far;
> And must I lean and long across a bar,
> That half a word would shatter utterly?

Ah might it be, that just by touch of hand,
Or speaking silence, shall the barrier fall;
And she shall pass, with no vain words at all,
But droop into mine arms, and understand!

By an English author the book was, Ernest Dowson, and Carlisle ran hastily through its pages, resolving to get a copy for himself at first opportunity.

He was sure that Eileen had found this volume, a gift from Lorna to Hugh, in her husband's desk with the little picture and had confiscated both in her angry jealousy.

Carlisle sighed. There was something wrong with the world when these two loving hearts must suffer in silence. Yet was Eileen to be blamed?

Yes, Carlisle thought, remembering Percy's story of the way the marriage had come about. It was easy to imagine Hugh Abercrombie ten years ago, shy, sensitive, helpless against the determination of a beautiful and dominating woman.

Small wonder she could make him marry her. Smaller wonder he regretted it too late. Smallest wonder of all that he found his real love in a woman like Lorna Garth.

True, Carlisle had never seen Eileen, and he was willing to believe all he heard of her great attractiveness, but he knew, too, that she never could be to Hugh what Lorna was to him. Eileen, resplendent in her beauty, magnificent in her power, and learned in all worldly wisdom, had not the same appeal as this wide-eyed, pure-faced woman.

And so suppose the two worn and tortured souls had

reached the end of their rope; suppose Eileen's taunts and reproaches had become unbearable, could it have been that Hugh's long patience had snapped, his self-restraint had given way?

But that was a subject for thought. Now time was pressing, and Carlisle must remember he was, first, last, and all the time a detective.

Half absent-mindedly he went to the dressing room and bath of these apartments, the luxurious rooms of the dead woman.

Mechanically his eye took in all the details, the perfect taste of the fittings and appointments, the soft, well-chosen colourings and fabrics.

He opened the medicine cabinet as a matter of course, not with an idea of finding a real clue.

Yet his trained vision caught a mark on the shelf where a bottle had been and now was not. Another similar, smaller mark. Another still.

He observed more closely. These bottles had been removed lately.

This was evident from the white mark on the shelf paper, whereas the rest of it showed a faint film of dustiness. Not dust, the housekeeping was too good for that, but a vague discolouration that could be explained only by a bottle removed. Further scrutiny convinced him that two of these marks were left by bottles and one by a box. Also, there were bottles on the one shelf and boxes on the other to prove his surmise correct.

Well, what did that tell him?

Only that these removed containers might have held

poison and might have been merely discarded medicine bottles.

But it was the kind of clue that Carlisle loved—a clue that wasn't there rather than a clue that was there.

He looked again, to learn, perchance, something from the bottles surrounding the empty places.

These told him little; only one clear call came to him.

That was, that all in the two sections he had under consideration were prescriptions of Dr. Garth's.

Other shelves held the ordinary drugs found in all medicine chests: Pond's extract, listerine, aspirin, sodamints—all the regulation remedies.

But in the methodically arranged lot under his eye he saw plainly that the doctor's prescriptions were all together, and the missing ones had been removed from that section.

It might mean nothing at all, but it was securely cached in Carlisle's memory.

He was standing staring at the shelves when the bathroom door opened, and the secretary stood looking at him.

Not at all embarrassed, Carlisle returned the stare with interest.

"What are you doing here?" Miss Mercer inquired in her high, sharp voice.

Carlisle hated that voice; it sounded to him artificial, as if she were trying to assume a tone of a higher class than she belonged to.

"Looking about," he answered coolly, and remained

leaning against the wall, his arms folded and eyes smiling at her.

"Find anything?" with a more conciliatory air.

"What do you mean?"

"My meaning doesn't seem to me obscure. Did you find anything in that medicine chest?"

"No, I found something out of it."

"You mean you found out something?"

"Not that. I mean I found something taken out of it."

"Where is it—what you found?"

"I don't know. Do you?"

"Oh, don't talk funny stuff. What do you mean?"

"Just this. Please look and you will see three articles have been removed rather lately. From here and here and here." He pointed to the places. "Do you know what was there?"

"Why, yes." Miss Mercer seemed interested. "In that place was a box of stuff Mrs. Abercrombie used for corns. And beside it was, I think, a bottle of—— Oh, I don't know what was there."

"Don't tell untruths, Miss Mercer. You do know."

"No, I'm not sure. But on that other shelf was a box of powders Dr. Garth made up for her not long ago. Who took them away? Did you?"

"No, did you?"

"No," said Miss Mercer, and perhaps from necessity, perhaps to hide her agitation, she picked up a small make-up box from the table and began to adjust her complexion.

"There's enough pigment on the map," said Carlisle, smiling as he watched her. "Look here, tell me all about it. Why? Won't you tell me why, Robin?"

He smiled cajolingly and a bit knowingly, and Miss Mercer showed a rising colour that did not come out of the make-up box.

She gave him one long look, half quizzical, half angry, and then quickly left the room.

"Well," said Carlisle, not quite aloud but in a half-audible whisper, "well, I will be everlastingly miscomswizzled and ramjammed!"

## CHAPTER X

### *The Loveliness of Lorna*

KENNETH CARLISLE betook himself to his small sanctum and shut himself in. He wanted to think—to think slowly, deeply, and uninterruptedly for a long time.

"I'm afraid," he told himself, "that one brief lifetime will be all too short to do the amount of thinking this case seems to require."

He mentally went over his interview with Hugh Abercrombie.

He had to admit that the more he saw of that man the better he liked him.

He was such a wistful, appealing sort.

Carlisle smiled to himself at these adjectives applied to a man, and a man that was unmistakably strong and fine.

And yet Hugh Abercrombie had a motive, and he had an opportunity for that terrible crime. Could he have thought that he had done his duty by the woman who had married him out of hand? For it seemed certain that Eileen had practically shanghaied him into that marriage. Carlisle's rather hectic years with theatrical people had made him wise in the ways of women who married their juniors.

Could the man have honestly felt that ten years of devotion was all he should be expected to sacrifice to his mistaken mating and have argued to himself that he owed it to Lorna to give her a chance for happiness?

This was far-fetched reasoning, he owned to himself, but was there not a possibility? Couldn't Hugh and Lorna feel that a love like theirs sanctified deeds commonly judged sinful?

Unless these assumptions were right, or nearly right, there was no chance of Hugh's being the poisoner. Nothing would have made that man kill his wife except a sense of duty to another woman. His own love for Lorna, his own wish to be free to marry her, would not have been sufficient goad to the deed.

Carlisle could not see Abercrombie a criminal for his own selfish ends; but for the sake of another, a loved one, he could see Hugh exalting the crime to a deed of high resolve, a sacrifice of his own honour and manhood.

That the results would benefit him equally with that other would not, Carlisle felt convinced, be any factor in the case.

"I guess I'm nutty," he told himself. "That's fine detective work—to judge a man guilty of murder to please his lady fair with no thought of himself! Sort of head-on-a-charger business. Guess I'm a story-book sleuth, and fairy stories at that. Yet I know my man. I haven't registered emotions day in and day out without knowing what roused those emotions, what motivated their exhibition. My experience with actions

and reactions, with cause and effect, with impulse and reflex, gives me a knowledge of complex human nature not granted to everybody. And I'm sure of one thing: If Hugh Abercrombie didn't kill his wife because of the reasons I have assumed, then he didn't kill her at all! Someone else did. For he could do that deed only through the motivation I've mapped out. And that, said John, is that. Now, to see how he could have done it. Too easy. For there's in my mind no question as to how it was done. It's pretty conclusively proved that the poison was taken in the tea house between the hour of six-thirty, when Maisie left her mother there, and the hour of quarter to seven or thereabouts, when Fetter came to clear up. But there's an equal chance as to whether the poison was put into her glass before Maisie came or after she left. For the murderer must have been there for a short time, accomplished his task, and got away mighty quick.

"I can't seem to entertain the possibility that Maisie did it herself; it's too hard to believe. I don't like the chit, she's a spoiled child, but oh, my heavens, not a matricide! Motive? Well, her mother didn't want her to marry Percy, but I doubt if she'll marry him anyway. She insisted upon it largely because her parents forbade it, though I doubt if her stepfather had much voice in the matter save to echo his wife's dictum. No, I can't consider Maisie mixed up in this thing.

"How about other people? That Mercer person, for instance. Good Lord, I struck a big thing when I hit on the secret of the social secretary! That red hair fairly

seemed to blaze up in wrath! But motive? No amount of overwork or tyrannical faultfinding would lead to such a revenge as murder. And there's no chance of Miss Mercer's having had a love affair with Hugh or any other of the men about. Wonder if she smiled on Van Antwerp. But Percy has eyes only for the madcap Maisie. I don't think he likes the Mercer.

"Well, I've learned a lot this morning. And all the letters and books and pictures of those two unhappy lovers only stir me to pity for them, not censure. What a hell life must have been for Hugh Abercrombie all these latter years. No matter if Eileen was a queen among women, she had no message for him. But that Lorna girl, now. Well, that looks to me like a heaven-made match. And I really haven't another decent suspect except Hugh. I simply must find one. Impossible? Well, I feel rather like Goethe or whoever it was, who said, 'I love the man who craves the impossible.'

"To be sure, there's Lorna herself. Murder is not a ladylike deed, but from the days of Lucrezia Borgia poison has been called the woman's weapon. And if Hugh could do it for Lorna, why not Lorna for Hugh? Guess I'd better see the lady, anyhow. Now what's this other paper—pasteboard, rather—I dug out of Abercrombie's desk? Oho, I perceive it's a menu—labelled in a quaint American fashion 'Bill of Fare.'

"It's a real American bill of fare, too, with so many dishes on it that it makes your head swim. Lord, when I was a boy how those things seemed to me the be-all and end-all of existence. And they nearly ended mine.

when I found I could eat just as many of them as I chose or rather as I could hold for the one fixed price! But what in the world is the fastidious Hugh doing with a thing like this, and why keep it?"

Carlisle studied the card with its multitudinous viands arranged in groups.

At once he saw that several of the dishes had a light pencil mark as if chosen for a meal.

The card bore an ornate legend to the effect that it was the announcement of Ye Roade Syde Inne, and the date was less than a week ago. To be exact, it was the Friday of the week before and was therefore the day that Abercrombie was absent, according to Maisie from the family dinner table.

Downing had told Carlisle of this fact, and both men had wondered where Abercrombie had dined that night, their especial wonder being whether Lorna Garth had dined with him.

Carlisle had a premonition he was about to find that out, and he scanned the food list.

The marked dishes were simple though numerous.

They included clam chowder, white fish, broiled chicken, salad and cheese, and several desserts with high-sounding names.

"H'm," soliloquized the interested detective, "guess they ate this Lucullan feast or pecked at it the while they gazed into each other's eyes. Friday night, when Mrs. Hugh lay writhing on her bed of pain, the lovers held secret meeting at Ye Jigamaroo Inne! But why preserve this badly printed card as a souvenir?"

Then looking more closely he saw in faint pencilling beneath the printed date the words—My Birthday.

"Oh, my Lord," he groaned. "Writing it all down, so that he who runs may read! Surely these infants are not other than innocent!"

Friday! The night after the tea. Oh, well, it added nothing to and detracted nothing from what he already knew of those two. They would grasp at any chance to see one another. Of late they had grown more daring. Hence, the illness of Eileen—Hugh had doubtless learned she would not appear at dinner—gave him a chance to call up Lorna and spirit her away, probably in a car, to the blissful if unromantic privacy of the Inne. He knew all that, knew they would do just such a thing if they got a chance. But that didn't connote murder. He vowed it didn't! Yet he must be fair. It did show a disregard of conventions that they had seemingly not shown before. Did they know that Eileen was doomed? That they might look forward to freedom?

And after all, was he sure of his facts? Maybe Hugh was more promiscuous in his philandering than anyone supposed. Maybe he was there with some girl besides Lorna. Or some man—well, no, the faint pencillings were surely a woman's writing, and it looked like Lorna's.

He must know.

He flung open the door to the hall and told a footman who was hovering there to send him the butler.

"Fetter," he said coldly, "is Mr. Abercrombie fond of clam chowder?"

The butler's face, looking like a mask of kiln-dried clay, permitted itself no relaxation.

"Very much so, sir," he said with a slight, deferential bow.

"Does he like broiled chicken, does he care for a bit of cheese with his salad, does he like sweets?"

"Yes, sir, all those things are among his favourites. He is especially fond of sweet puddings with sauce, and conserved fruits."

"I see. That is all, Fetter."

The butler departed to spread the news among his cronies that the new detective was "half looney and one of your silly boobs."

He heard, as Fetter went out, a trilling whistle that he knew to be Maisie's, and he called her in.

She came, a bit unwillingly, for she was more than half afraid of this eccentric person. She had welcomed him at first, for who wouldn't welcome a Kenneth Carlisle?

But he was proving to be so much more of a detective than a screen star that she felt hugely disappointed.

Nor was this interview an exception.

"What date is Miss Garth's birthday?" he flung at her.

"It was last Friday," she returned. "Why? Are you casting her horoscope? And let me tell you this, my Flossy Floozie. Don't you get all hot and bothered over Lorna Garth. She wouldn't do anything wrong, nor my Bobbo, neither. They're two angel childs, and if Dad wasn't so keen over Mother as he might have been it

was pretty much Mum's fault. Why, when she married him, and I was only ten then, I knew it was the snake's hips! I've always known things, you see. I was born knowing. And I loved Eileen. But because I love people I'm not necessarily blind to their faults. So, as I say, don't cast Lorna for the villainess of the piece."

"Who, then?"

"Oh, there are others! How about that Loring zob? He had opportunity enough, shut up with her for hours at a time, spuggling over her accounts. She had Mercer to do her current accounts, shopping checks, and tradespeople's books, and all that. Why have an expert accountant resident in the house?"

"Do you like Miss Mercer?"

"Why, er—yes. That is, I don't, but I want her to stay with me so I won't have to write notes all the time."

"Do you think she is—er—faithful and true?"

Maisie gave him an odd glance. "Faithful," she said, "but not so damned true."

"Was she at dinner here on Friday night?"

"Oh, yes, she's always here to dinner. Never knew her to be absent."

"Nobody asks her to go out to dine ever?"

"Nixy. She hasn't any beaux, she's——"

"She's an independent sort?"

"All of that. Well, want to know anything else about Miss Maude Mercer?"

"No, about your father. Where did he dine on that Friday night?"

"Mercy, I don't know. At the country club, maybe. He's his own caretaker."

"That's all. Good-morning." Carlisle looked at her with a patronizing smile as at a child.

"It's afternoon now. Guess you forgot to eat lunch."

"Guess I did. Good-afternoon, then."

He returned to an absorbed perusal of his papers and notes, and Maisie made a face at him and departed.

Then he started off at once and went to the garage.

Here he commandeered a small car which he drove himself and made straight for Ye Roade Syde Inne.

It turned out to be a more attractive place than he had imagined from its name, and he went into the pleasant, tree-shaded dining room and took a seat at a table.

A waiter came smilingly, and Carlisle saw that as usual he was recognized.

"You know me?" he said conversationally.

"Who doesn't, sir? Many's the time I've seen you makin' love in the pictures."

"Yes, that's my forte. Do you know love-making when you see it?"

"I ought to, sir, with a job at this place."

"Yes, I daresay. Now, listen, buddy. Do you remember last Friday night a man and a woman dined here were deeply in love."

"They all are, mostly. 'Less'n they're scrapping."

Carlisle sighed at the thought of the people he had in mind being mixed up with the ones the waiter massed as They All.

"Well, you may know these I mean. The man was Mr. Hugh Abercrombie."

"Righto! Then the lady was the doctor's daughter. But they didn't act loverish, not so you'd notice it 'specially. Just seemed like nice people who wanted a feed."

Of course, Carlisle thought, that's just how they would act in a public place.

"They had an elaborate dinner?"

"I waited on 'em. Yes, sir, they ordered quite a lot of things, but they didn't eat much. Just toyed with the food like and talked."

"That's all right. Were they here long?"

"Yes, they seemed in no hurry. But they were gone before nine o'clock, for I'm off at that time."

A somewhat valuable token of regard and esteem passed from Carlisle's hand into the waiter's as a reward for the man's promise to hold the conversation sacredly confidential, and Carlisle then ordered a satisfying luncheon for himself.

He found the food extremely good and thought to himself that Hugh and Lorna chose a fine place for their meeting.

There were no guests present that seemed of Hugh's circle of friends, and the ones who were there were evidently motor tourists or near-by country folk.

As he ate he pondered over the situation, and when he rose from the table he had made up his mind to go to see Lorna at once.

So toward Dr. Garth's he turned his little car and soon was rolling up the drive to the pleasant country house.

He was shown onto a glass-enclosed porch, where Lorna joined him.

He was shocked at her pallor and general air of illness but made no reference to it as he greeted her.

"I'm Kenneth Carlisle," he said, as he well knew, unnecessarily, for who was not familiar with his face?

"Yes," she said with a wan little smile, "I've seen you on the screen."

She seemed listless rather than sad, hopeless rather than sorrowful.

Carlisle's heart went out to her. She was so finely beautiful—her white skin had the soft tint of a camellia blossom, and her dark eyes beneath their heavy brows raised themselves questioningly to his.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Carlisle?" she went on. "You want to question me?"

"I don't want to, Miss Garth, but I fear I have to." He knew just how to tinge his smile with respect, admiration, and a certain reassurance, which he could see she was quick to catch. "You see, I am a detective now instead of a movie actor, and I am beginning to find out that life is real, life is earnest."

"You like the work, then, of a detective?"

He caught the irony of her tone, but he ignored it.

"No," he said, "not in all its duties. But there is a satisfaction in helping to get justice done."

"Is there such a thing as justice, then?"

"Oh, yes, and in this case I hope to find it. Now, Miss Garth, how much or how little do you care to tell me as to your own connection with the Abercrombie tragedy?"

"You put it strangely, Mr. Carlisle. Why do you think I have any connection with it?"

"I don't mean you have any connection with the crime itself, but you are interested in Mr. Abercrombie?"

"Am I?"

A seraphic look stole over Lorna's face. It was as if the sound of that name stirred the very depths of her soul and irradiated her whole being. She showed no embarrassment, no shame, only a gentle tenderness that made no effort to hide itself.

"Yes. You need make no answer. Now, Miss Garth, let me speak to you frankly. Let me tell you there are troublous times ahead for you two."

She looked anxious but not really alarmed.

"Oh, I think not. We are good friends, but that is all."

"Don't talk like that," he interrupted her; "you see, I know just how good friends you are."

"You have it from him?" Her voice was a little strained now.

"No, I have it from my detective work on the matter."

"Detective work! About Hugh and me?"

"Just that. Don't minimize the importance of what

I am telling you. I am ready to be your friend, but I must have the truth from you. You and Mr. Abercrombie dined at the Roadside Inn last Friday night."

"Yes, we did. We made no secret of it."

"No, but you did have a secret meeting under the big maple tree on the lawn at Graysands the night after Mrs. Abercrombie died."

This brought the effect he had feared. The girl's face took on a drawn look, as if she were appalled by the revelation of this knowledge.

"You were told this?"

"I learned it. I tell you only because I want you to understand that you cannot keep this friendship secret. Many people know it, more surmise it, but the authorities are certain of it, and it will add motive to the suspicions already forming in their minds."

"By the authorities you mean the police?"

"I am sorry to say I do."

"Why do you say you are sorry? You are here to hunt me down, to add anything you can learn from me to your store of findings against him! To track him and hound him until you build up a case of falsehood and misstatements to prove him a criminal. You know he isn't one! You know that to look into Hugh Abercrombie's face is enough to prove that he is incapable of crime! You know he never did this thing! Never dreamed of such a deed as poisoning his wife!"

"He had ceased to love her."

"He never loved her. She made him marry her when he was a mere innocent boy. A clever woman of the

world can infatuate a young man of Hugh's type and marry him before he realizes it. You know enough of the world to know that!"

"I do, Miss Garth, but that in itself is not a proof of innocence. I want you to do more for him than that. I want you to tell where he was at about six-thirty on the day of the garden party. Was he with you and nowhere near the tea house? If you can prove that, you will probably save him from any further suspicion. For it is generally conceded that that is the time when the poison was given to her."

"I know. And gladly would I tell if we had been together then. But we were not. We were together more or less during the afternoon. But we parted about six. I came home, and Hugh said he was going to the house to dress for dinner."

"You knew that he hoped to persuade his wife to divorce him before the matter was brought up at the inquest?"

For a moment Carlisle thought the girl meant to deny this. Then in a low voice she said, "Yes, I knew it."

"Your affair was more than a friendship, then?"

"It was." She faced him bravely. "It was love, the deepest, purest love anyone ever knew in this wicked world. But it was not what is known as an affair. I have never met Hugh Abercrombie save in the presence of other people. We have met at parties or at country houses but never clandestine meetings save the one you just mentioned under the maple tree that night. I

don't know who told you, but that was the only time we have ever met secretly. We have had short motor rides now and then. We have lunched or dined at wayside inns, and we have met at dances. But there has never been a meeting behind closed doors, and I have no memories to regret or to be ashamed of."

"You carried on a correspondence?"

"Yes, he has written me the most beautiful letters a woman ever received from a man. I cherish them as my dearest possessions. I'm telling you this, Mr. Carlisle, so you will not think us guilty of a secret liaison. He did want to be freed from Eileen, he did ask her to divorce him, but he never sought his freedom through crime! Anyone who knows him will tell you that."

"Doubtless. But what is needed is proof. If you could have sworn he was with you at the time we assume the lady to have taken the poison it would be a great help for your case."

"How can I do that when he wasn't with me?"

"How are you so sure of the time?"

"I'm not sure to a minute. But I know I went home about six. I thought of going to the tea house to say good-bye to Eileen, but I concluded it was unnecessary as it was not a formal party."

"Did you see anyone as you were leaving the grounds?"

"Yes, a number of people. I saw Mr. and Mrs. Carmichael coming from the tea house, and I joined them, and we all walked down the street together. Mr. Robertson was with them, but he turned off in another

direction. I don't remember anyone else definitely, but there were a few last guests just going home."

"Was that rather an early hour for the festivities to be over?"

"Oh, no, such things break up early. Most of us were going on to dinner or somewhere, and the days are all crowded now as it nears the end of the season."

"And you can't say whether Mr. Abercrombie went to the house at once when you left him or not?"

"I only know he said he meant to do so. I suppose he did. But, Mr. Carlisle, instead of worrying about Mr. Abercrombie, who didn't do it, why not find out who did do it. I was sure at first the poison was taken by accident. Now, the coroner has made me believe that it was administered by someone with a deadly purpose. Who was it? Not Mr. Abercrombie, of that you may be sure. But who?"

"Miss Garth, that is my idea exactly. Now, can't you tell me something, some little thing that will lead to a just suspicion of somebody else? Who else could have benefited by Mrs. Abercrombie's death except her husband and . . . and yourself?"

"You have put it into words, haven't you? That is what the police are saying, I suppose. Hugh Abercrombie and I are the chosen scapegoats. They have no evidence, no clues, no proofs, but we are friendly with each other, therefore we are guilty. Is that justice? Is that fair treatment?"

"Perhaps not. But it is the only avenue of research open to us."

"But you have made no research."

"Oh, yes, we have. We have searched Mr. Abercrombie's rooms and also his wife's, and we found what you call clues. We found letters from you, pictures of you, a book you gave him."

Carlisle shot these facts at her suddenly with a definite and distinct purpose. He wanted to get her angry, because he felt sure she would tell him more if he could break through that calm of hers.

She did.

## CHAPTER XI

### *Let Sleeping Dogs Lie*

"So YOU have done that?" Lorna said, her voice tense with suppressed excitement. "You have ferreted out what seems to you proof against your suspects, with no thought of investigating other possibilities. And you call that justice! I do not ask for mercy; I do not want undue consideration or any special favours. But I do want a right and fair inquiry into these matters, and I think a fair-minded detective would want that, too."

Carlisle looked at her. She could have posed for a statue of avenging justice, so stern and accusing was the expression on her face. Her eyes did not flash; they seemed smouldering with a deep sense of injury, a righteous wrath that was roused to boiling point by his revelations.

"To a degree you are right, Miss Garth," he began, but she interrupted him, not rudely, but in her quiet, calm tones that carried greater weight than would more emphatic accents.

"I am entirely right," she averred. "You and Sergeant Downing jumped to the conclusion that Mr. Abercrombie and I wanted his wife to die, and so, you argued, we must have brought it about."

The scorn of her tone was withering, and as he looked

at her Carlisle found it hard to believe that he had, in effect, reasoned out the case pretty much as she declared.

"Can you suggest any other suspect?" he said almost humbly.

"That is not my business, that is yours. Why should I suggest anyone when I have no evidence, no proof to offer? I have not been searching in desks or bureau drawers. I have not assumed that because I want a person to be guilty he is therefore guilty, and evidence must be found to fit the case."

"But," Carlisle began to feel he must defend himself, "the evidence is so very clear that you and Mr. Abercrombie——"

"Have I denied that? I admit—I am proud to admit that Hugh Abercrombie and I do care for one another; that we would have married long ago had it been possible; that we did wish he might be divorced from his wife. But is that a unique case? Is it even unusual in these times? How many married people want divorce and get it! But that doesn't argue that those people are murderers! Remember you have no shred of evidence for crime. For our attachment you have dug up proofs, yes. But how can you accuse of murder a high-minded, fine-souled man as you know Hugh Abercrombie to be without a bit of evidence, without even a seeming clue?"

"We feel that the many evidences of your love affair lead to the possibility of Mr. Abercrombie's inability to stand the strain longer and——"

"You have no right or reason to feel that. No solid ground to back such a theory. The truth is you can think of no other way to look, and you take the line of least resistance. Well, you'll find there will be resistance. Mr. Abercrombie is not a fighter. Anyone who knows his gentle, sensitive nature will tell you that. But I am. I come of fighting stock, and I propose to combat this unjust and unreasonable suspicion you have set up, and unless you can find some other way to look I shall call in some detective who can."

"I think you'd make a good detective yourself." And Carlisle gazed at her in deepest admiration.

"I would except that I know none of the technical details of such a calling. But in this case I am, of course, prejudiced. If we could work together, now . . ."

"I begin to think I don't want to work with anybody. I can't entirely agree with Downing. I don't subscribe to all the theories Van Antwerp puts out. I am not sure I fully acquiesce in all you say."

"Then work by yourself but take a wider view. Look about at other possibilities, other suspects. No matter if they don't seem likely. They're a hundred times more likely than Hugh or myself! Find out a few things. Hunt down the source of the poison. Look up opportunities. Question for motives. Oh, do something, don't just sit down complacently and say, 'it must have been her husband!' What about all the other people in that house? Half a dozen of them there. I don't accuse them, but I do say they should be investigated—not by a stupid coroner but by a wide-awake detective!"

"Good for you, Lorna, give it to him!" And Dr. Garth, who had been standing for the last few minutes in the hallway, came out on the porch where they were.

"You heard me rather sternly arraigned," Carlisle said, his smile a little grim. "And I admit Miss Garth is right; there should be a wider sweep of our investigations. I own right up to it, and I shall endeavour to step out on the lines she has indicated. If it helps to exonerate her from suspicion no one will be more glad than I am. Can you help us any, Doctor, regarding the poison?"

"Yes, I can do that," the doctor returned, speaking slowly and in a serious tone. "It will necessitate a confession, but I am ready to make it. I shall declare to you that I have made myself an accessory after the fact, but I am hoping you won't feel it necessary to spread that bit of information."

"You sound interesting, at any rate," Carlisle observed, studying the kindly old face.

"Yes, probably that. Well, when I first visited Mrs. Abercrombie's bedroom after hearing of her death I was alone in the room with the dead woman. After an examination that proved to me pretty conclusively what had brought about her death I looked about for any traces of the poison. There were none in the bedroom or boudoir, but in the medicine cabinet on the bathroom wall I found three items that did not seem to me suspicious, but which I knew would seem so to any layman. I therefore removed them, putting them in my pockets, and carrying them away with me."

"And those three items," Carlisle said quietly,

"were two small bottles and a little box—a box of powders that you had made up."

Dr. Garth stared at him.

"I'll say you're a detective, young man," he burst forth. "How under the canopy did you know all that? Well, since you're so smart, what was in the bottles?"

"One was a preparation for curing corns, and I don't know what was in the other, but it was a small, old bottle."

"Absolutely correct! It was. And it held laudanum, very old laudanum which is more deadly than the fresh material."

"Why did you take these things away, Dr. Garth?"

"You have every right to ask that, and I'll tell you. I knew none of the three killed Mrs. Abercrombie, but I knew some blundering investigator would think it did and would——"

"Would trace it back to you."

"Well, yes, that pretty much covers the ground."

"What were the powders for?"

"They were preparations of calomel. That, as you doubtless know, is a form of mercury and has been known to produce fatal effects."

"Were you sure that Mrs. Abercrombie's death was not the result of those powders?"

"Absolutely. Because not one powder had been taken from the box. It was just as I gave it to her, its full contents intact. But it would lead to controversy, so I pocketed it."

"And the corn remedy?"

"That was a little box of tablets of bichloride of mercury. It is against the law to give these to patients, but some chiropodists have been known to do so. I felt so certain that Mrs. Abercrombie had not used these, for the box seemed to be full, that I abstracted that also. I had no motive save protecting the good name of the lady herself and her household. The murderer, if it was murder, gave her the dose that day in the tea house. Therefore these poisons in the medicine cabinet would only clog up the case and lead to unjust suspicions."

"It was a high-handed piece of business, Dr. Garth."

"It was, Mr. Carlisle. You can tell the authorities if you choose. I did it from the best and purest of motives, but if I am arraigned for it I will confess freely."

"I shall reserve decision for the present, Doctor. I don't mind admitting that I am in more or less of a quandary. Your daughter gave me a jolt, and you have given me a surprise. Now may I ask you if you have any pet suspect? Any possible reason to look in any certain direction? If so, I should be most awfully glad of a hint. I am not a cocksure detective, but I do think I am beginning to see a little light at the end of the tunnel."

"Oh, do you?" cried Lorna. "Tell me, let me help you. I have intuition, I know, and I have knowledge of the people around here that you can't possibly have. Let me work with you, Mr. Carlisle, and we can clear Mr. Abercrombie by finding the real criminal."

"I can't take you in as full partner, Miss Garth, but

I shall be glad indeed to confer with you now and then. By the way, and this is in no sense a question of culpability, what do you think of Miss Mercer?"

Lorna looked only slightly interested as she replied:

"I've never thought very much about her. She has a strong personality but not an altogether attractive one. I gathered from Eileen that she did her work satisfactorily, and I think she is quick-witted and intelligent."

"Just why do you ask?" inquired the doctor. "Do you suspect Miss Mercer—oh, not of implication in the death of Mrs. Abercrombie, but of——"

"But of being a mass of deceit? Yes, I do."

"So do I," said Dr. Garth gravely, and then Kenneth Carlisle, finding that time was flying, betook himself back to the Abercrombie Arms.

At dinner he sat with Percy Van Antwerp.

"If you'd rather be alone, old chap, just say so," Percy told him.

"No, I'm glad to talk things over with somebody, and it might as well be you. I suppose I need a Watson, though I've an unreasonable prejudice against setting up such an institution."

"Oh, well, I'll just be a near-Watson, a sort of dummy Watson, at whom you can fling your diatribes."

"Yes, that's what I want. Now, first of all, do you think Abercrombie killed his wife?"

"Not in a million years! I told you that first crack out of the box."

"I know it. All right, then who did? Now don't say

that's what I'm here to find out. I know that, but tell me your leanings."

"You know, Ken, it's a serious matter to accuse anybody of a thing like that. Oh, I don't mean I'm afraid to speak out in meetin', but with very little to go on it's pretty awful to turn the breath of suspicion on one who may be entirely innocent."

"Yes, I know. But there's no harm in talking them over. You give Abercrombie a clean bill of health. I suppose that goes for Miss Garth, too."

"Oh, yes, of course. Lorna Garth couldn't stoop to crime!"

"Is that all you have to go on? A feeling that the lady is too high-minded?"

"It's more than you have to go on when you suspect her! Have you any evidence at all?"

"Only her affair with the man himself. But hang it all, Perc, that's a lot. Who else had a motive of any sort whatever?"

"You don't know. There are secret motives, you must admit."

"All right. Let's begin with Miss Mercer. Could she have a secret motive?"

"Of course she could. Anybody could. But I don't know of any, do you?"

"No. Do you like the girl?"

"I neither like nor dislike her. She isn't the type I admire. Too strong minded. But I can't think why she'd kill Eileen."

"I don't think she did. What about Mr. Loring?"

"Well, I've not much deep affection for Troy, but I'd hate to impute murder to him without some good reason."

"Isn't there any reason connected with his stewardship of Mrs. Abercrombie's estate?"

Van Antwerp fidgeted a little.

"I know he's hard up, and I know Eileen left him a whacking big legacy in her will. But that doesn't prove him a criminal."

"It suggests motive. Has the will been read?"

"Not formally, I think. But everybody knows its content. Eileen never made any secret of it. She left all her wealth to Maisie and of course all her personal property, too, with the exceptions of a really large bequest to Troy, a smaller one to Miss Mercer, and nice remembrances to the servants."

"Nothing to you?"

"Oh, Lord, no. She wasn't terribly fond of me because I fell for Maisie. You see, I used to be Eileen's adorer, and when I transferred my adoration to her daughter it didn't set very well. Eileen was a mighty fine woman, but she had her full share of jealousy. And to see me prefer Maisie to her was a bitter pill. But I couldn't help it. I love that little witch, and I know I'd make her a better husband than the young whipper-snappers of today. But Eileen didn't like to lose me from her string of scalps. Yet I think she would have come around to it in time. In fact, she was inclined that way of late. Had she lived I've not the slightest doubt she would have given her consent. Maisie thinks so, too."

"Maisie loves you?"

"Oh, yes, as deeply as that sort of perverse nature can love. At times she is crazy about me, and then she'll quarrel and everything's off only to be renewed the next day. Still, now she's by way of being an heiress I may get the sack. You're not thinking of suspecting her, are you?"

"Heavens, no. But I can't find any real suspect. How about the servants?"

"I don't know much about them except as I see them at their duties. They seem a good enough lot, and Eileen was a general favourite with underlings. She was always kind to them, and they appeared to worship her. You see, Ken, suspicion like the celebrated chickens is bound to come home to roost. Wherever you sheer off to you make no progress and are brought up with a round turn against Hugh and Lorna. Don't think for a moment I believe any wrong of either or both of them; I only say they're the obvious suspects. Can't you drop the whole thing?"

"I wish I could, but I can't see my way clear to do that. Perhaps something definite will come out. What about those people who were with Mrs. Abercrombie in the tea house late that afternoon?"

"Who?"

"A Mr. and Mrs. Carmichael, I believe. And a Mr. Robertson."

"Oh, those." Van Antwerp's brow clouded. "Look here, Ken," he said. "If you ask me I'd let them alone. Mrs. Carmichael is a cat—she's got it in for Hugh and

Lorna. She talks to everybody about them. Even Eileen heard of it through her. She doesn't know anything, she couldn't be of any help to you, but her venomous tongue would start rumours about Hugh and Lorna, and I'd hate to have them subjected to her unfair and unjust gossip."

"But if they were the last ones to see Mrs. Abercrombie, and they well may have been?"

"But they didn't give her poison. And you bet the poisoner didn't let them see him about. So what could they do to help? They'd only make more trouble for poor Hugh, and he's in deep enough already. Let sleeping dogs lie, I say."

"That's right. I don't mind admitting. I've a lot of sympathy for Mr. Abercrombie and Miss Garth. They're not to blame for falling into Fate's hands."

"No. It was inevitable. They're actually made for each other. And there couldn't have been a more incompatible pair than Hugh and Eileen. Why she wanted him I never could imagine. Except, of course, that he is a dear fellow and handsome and rich and all that. But twelve years younger! That's an impossible situation. She must have known she couldn't hold him."

"Yet she was captivating."

"That's just the word. Captivating to the last degree. But strong, powerful, even militant, and all those stupendous virtues and glories that Hugh didn't want or need in a wife. Eileen was dominant, royal—really a despot. Everybody obeyed her lightest word and never from fear, always from love or a sort of hypnotic

compulsion. But that didn't appeal to Hugh. He fell for Lorna because she is his own type—dreamy, poetic, sensuous, without a trace of sensuality; to use a phrase that I hate, she was his soul's affinity, in very truth."

"And they've been waiting long?"

"Yes, four or five years. And they've been good. No sordid, common love affair for theirs. I've watched them, and they've eaten their hearts out in silent agony. They have met now and then, but there has been no clandestine companionship. Oh, I know; I'm around with the family so much, and Hugh and I are really good friends. He never talked straight out, you know, but I couldn't help sensing the situation. Now, neither of those blessed people ever killed that woman. Don't make the mistake of thinking they did. But, also, unless you need them for real, definite witnesses don't drag in those Carmichaels. He's almost as much of a gossip as she is. Let the somnolent canines remain napping."

"I certainly won't stir them up at present. I'm going to dig into the situation from a new viewpoint. I must find a motive aside from the lovers. And there can be no question of money. Nobody benefits that way but the daughter, and I take it she had all she wanted while her mother lived."

"Oh, yes, Maisie is not a mercenary sort. Extravagant as all the youngsters are. But she could always bamboozle her mother into giving her all she wanted. And Loring is not much of a suspect. His legacy is a fair-sized one, but he wouldn't murder Eileen to get it."

"Was he here at the tea?"

"Oh, yes, I saw him around. But I wasn't with him at all."

"Well, I've got to think things out. You're a good help, Perc. You let me babble on, and when I want to get facts you're ready to give them to me."

"Sure. Anything else you want to know?"

"What about Dr. Garth?"

"As a murderer! Cut it out. That old duffer wouldn't kill one of his most important patients!"

"No, of course not. But would he help to hush things up if he had a chance and wanted to shield somebody?"

"If that somebody was Lorna, yes. But I can't think of anybody else he'd help out. Do you think of him as an accessory after the fact?"

"I think there's a bare possibility. But that throws it back to Miss Garth."

"Yes, and that won't do. Lorna Garth is a tall, pure lily. I don't say this because I am in love with her. I'm not. But I know her pretty well, and she's as fine as they come."

"All right, I'll take your word for it. Now, I'm going off to commune with myself, for that's the way to acquire wisdom, I think."

They left the table, and Van Antwerp went off to the bridge game, while Carlisle started off for a short stroll along the shore.

A little later, quite by chance, he met Troy Loring and decided this was a good time for a talk.

"Going anywhere?" he asked as Loring came his way.

"No, just for a walk."

"Care if I join you?"

"Glad to have you. Come along."

The two fell into step, and Carlisle wondered how best to open conversation. Deciding on quick action he said a little abruptly, "Were you here, Loring, that day of the garden party?"

"No, I wasn't. I planned to come and then at the last minute I found I couldn't make it. I expected to get here that evening for dinner, but I couldn't even work that. A matter turned up that I had to see to. So I telephoned Eileen that I couldn't come till the next day."

"What time was that?"

"I don't know. About six o'clock, I guess. A servant answered the telephone, and he said he'd tell Mrs. Abercrombie at once."

"What servant was it?"

"I don't know. One of the men. Not Fetter, though, I know his voice. Maybe one of the extra waiters they had in for the tea. Anyway, he didn't tell her, for when I got here the next day she said she never received the message at all."

Carlisle was interested in this story. Van Antwerp had said he saw Loring around in the grounds at the garden party. Of course, Percy might have been mistaken, might have mixed the day up with some other date in his memory, but Carlisle thought it possible that Loring was telling an untruth. For if there was anything that was suspicious in a matter of this kind it certainly would be the fixing of an alibi. And if Loring

had been in the grounds that day, and if he had been the poisoner of the lady's drink, it was most probable that he would invent an alibi and say he wasn't there.

"A very dangerous proceeding," Carlisle thought to himself, "but if this man is the murderer, and he may be, this thing must be sifted."

"Where did you dine that evening?" he said casually.

Loring answered without hesitation, "At the University Club. Then next day I came out here, and we fixed up the business she wanted to see me about."

He spoke with utmost nonchalance and seemed to have nothing to conceal.

"But," Carlisle reflected, "he's had time enough to cook up an alibi and get it letter perfect. I'll ask Perc if he's sure he saw him here."

Then he decided to become confidential.

"Do you think, Loring," he began, "that Mrs. Abercrombie was the victim of wilful murder?"

"I have to think that now," Loring said. "I didn't at first, but I know that she never killed herself, and so there's no question about it. Unless it was an accident."

"That hardly seems possible from what we know of the circumstances. But if it was murder, who's the most likely suspect?"

"Oh, Hugh, of course. Poor devil, I can't blame him overmuch. Eileen was a wonderful woman, but she rubbed that poor sheep the wrong way. And then a man shouldn't marry his grandmother."

Carlisle didn't like Loring and didn't like his manner

of speech, but he wanted information, so he jollied him along.

"I suppose he didn't do that of his own accord. He was rather kidnapped, wasn't he?"

"Yes, Eileen was a cradle-snatcher. Nobody knew quite why she wanted him. There were lots of men her own age she could have had. I'm a cousin of her first husband, you know, so I saw the whole performance. Yes, she just appropriated the youth willy-nilly."

"Yet Abercrombie is a good deal of a man."

"But he wasn't then. Ten years ago he was a boy—chivalrous, innocent, ignorant, and all that. Eileen spied him, and I think, partly out of mischief, she made him her slave."

"Her first husband was dead then?"

"Oh, yes. She had Maisie on her hands, a tomboy kid of ten or so. And I daresay Eileen wanted a good father for the child; or whatever was in her head, I don't know, but she certainly married Hugh. And they lived unhappy ever after."

"Whose fault?"

"Both or neither. They were like oil and water. They couldn't mix. They had no tastes in common, no sympathetic traits, no likings for the same things. Result: misery all round. Then Hugh ran up against the statuesque and pure-souled Lorna, and the fat was in the fire for sure."

"But I can't think either Mr. Abercrombie or Miss Garth was mixed up in this murder."

"Oh, you can't? Well, I can."

## CHAPTER XII

### *Poison All Over the Place*

On the next day, Thursday, funeral services were held for Eileen Abercrombie. Maisie refused to attend. She went alone for a last farewell to her mother as she lay in her flower-laden casket, and after that the girl went to her own room and locked herself in.

Miss Mercer, Hugh, and Percy all tapped at her door in their efforts to get a word with her, but the only response was a low-voiced but very determined, "Go away, all of you. Please let me alone."

"Don't bother her any more," Hugh said gently. "She can't bring herself to face the people, and I don't blame her. I'd rather stay out of it myself, but it wouldn't be right."

Carlisle had stated that he would not attend the services, but he made it a point to have a few words with each member of the household, for he had a strong desire to know how each one was meeting the situation.

His almost uncanny power of reading the human countenance found opportunity in the faces of those awaiting the hour set, eleven o'clock.

Abercrombie moved about, his manner much as usual, but Carlisle detected a flexing of muscles and a

quivering of his sensitive lips that told of the strain the man was under. Redmayne was ever at his side, but Loring seemed to avoid him.

Carlisle was getting more and more interested in Loring, and he watched him closely.

For if the lawyer had lied about telephoning he might have told other untruths, and the matter must be looked into. Carlisle remembered the straightforward, casual way Loring had told of his inability to make the expected visit to Graysands on the day of the tea and his arrival the next day. But it was only a short run from New York. What if he had motored down, had found opportunity to commit the crime, and had returned to town unseen of anybody?

A long shot, but there was something fishy about that telephone message that nobody received, and if Loring was in need of funds there was some room for suspicion.

Moreover, he was a suspectable sort. With his insolent air and his uncultured voice Carlisle cordially disliked him and wondered why the fastidious Eileen had suffered him about, even though he was a cousin of her former husband.

Anyway, Carlisle was marshalling his suspicions into line, and they must be confirmed or dismissed in order.

Maude Mercer still bothered him. He was sure he had discovered her secret, but whether that argued her a suspect or just the reverse he was not yet sure.

Seizing his chance as she came through the lounge hall where he sat he begged a word with her.

"Forgive me if I am abrupt," he said with his best

screen smile, "but I want to know something. Is Mercer your real name?"

"Oh, yes," she said, not at all offended. "My father is of English descent, and I can trace my ancestry duly back for many generations. Why?"

"And is Maude your real name?" and now he looked at her with a direct gaze that seemed to compel the truth.

"It is," came the ready reply. "The name of Maude was given me by my sponsors in baptism twenty-seven years ago."

"On your word of honour?"

"On my word of honour," and the big blue eyes looked straight into his own, and the strong chin set itself firmly. "It is my own true name. Why?"

Then with a sudden loss of interest the secretary produced her elaborate vanity case and proceeded to touch up her colouring and powder her nose, the while she gazed into the little mirror in the lid of the case.

Carlisle watched her intently a moment and then said:

"That's a new outfit, isn't it? Guess you bought that when you came here."

"Yes, I did," she returned, looking at him a little queerly. "I knew I ought to have fine and dainty appointments to please the somewhat critical eye of Mrs. Abercrombie, so I rather ran to extravagance."

"Does it never occur to you that you use cosmetics rather liberally?"

"What do you mean?" Maude Mercer flared at him,

while a flush stained the white skin that was not the rosiness of rouge.

"Only just that. As Shakespeare puts it, 'We may outrun, by violent swiftness, that which we run at, and lose by over-running.' So be careful, Miss Maude Mercer."

"Do you care to explain yourself?"

"Only to say that you are overdoing it a little."

"Thank you, I will be more careful."

"You're staying on here?"

"I don't know. I think I ought to go, but I am so interested in learning the truth about Mrs. Abercrombie's death."

"Of a detective turn of mind, are you?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then I suppose you have discovered how you came to be named Maude?"

"I have. My mother has an old friend who is now a famous theatrical star."

"Oh . . . I see!"

"I believe you do! May we have a talk soon? By ourselves. I must go now; it is nearing the hour."

"Yes, of course. Will you go to dinner with me tonight to some quiet inn or roadhouse?"

"Yes, I will. And you'll not give me away?"

"Certainly not."

Murgatroyd Loring next laid claim to Carlisle's attention.

The lawyer fairly strutted into the room. He was ac-

companied by Van Antwerp, but the latter was cast quite in the shade by Loring's splendour.

The man had evidently bestowed care and thought on his apparel.

It was of funereal black, and the funereal effect was carefully accentuated.

Never, Carlisle thought, had he seen such black black in all his life. The garments, the tie, the gloves, the hat, the border on the handkerchief, all were of a depth of blackness that made jet, ink, or ebony pale by comparison.

And the legal face was set in a stony mask of woe so gloomily tragic that Carlisle felt a sudden stinging conviction of its hypocrisy.

Beyond a grave bow of greeting Carlisle apparently took no notice of this impressive figure. But in reality he was studying Troy Loring with deep interest.

There was little to learn save that he had overdressed the part and doubtless was far less desolate at the death of his client than his appearance indicated.

As usual Carlisle was deducing from what he didn't see rather than what he did. Notwithstanding all the outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual sorrow there was lacking a depth of grief in the eyes; there was no hint of mental suffering in the set of the firm lips, and the smug self-consciousness of Loring's air contradicted any hint that he was carrying a burden of sorrow.

"Wonder where he really was at the time of the poisoning business," Carlisle pondered silently. "I can't

say I suspect him, but there are less likely ways to look."

Quietly he left the room and unostentatiously betook himself to Fetter's pantry.

The butler rather liked Carlisle, and he bowed gravely as he opened the door.

"I say, Fetter," Carlisle began, "don't fly away with the idea that I'm accusing anybody, but tell me in a few words what sort Mr. Loring is. You've known him a long time?"

"Yes, sir. In a word, sir, he's all for the money. Lives, works, schemes for money. You asked me to do him up in a few words—there he is."

Carlisle stared at him.

"Didn't know you had it in you, Fetter. Directness is a rare gift. Then did he kill Mrs. Abercrombie so he could get his inheritance?"

Fetter looked thoughtful.

"No, sir, because he wasn't here when the lady was poisoned, according to the doctors. But if he had been I wouldn't put it past him."

"Why? Was he hard up?"

"Mr. Loring is always hard up, sir. It's his habit. But at the present speaking he's a bit harder up than usual."

"How do you know?"

"The night before last I was called to take some refreshment to Mr. Abercrombie's study. I did so, and while I was setting things out Mr. Abercrombie and Mr. Redmayne kept right on talking, sir. I couldn't help hearing, of course, and they were saying about

Mr. Loring being unusually hard up, and that he had been nagging at Mrs. Abercrombie for money. And that something had to be done."

"I see. Now, Fetter, do you think you're doing right to tell me all this which you merely chanced to overhear?"

"Why, sir," Fetter looked surprised, "ain't you the detective? Ain't we all supposed to answer whatever you ask us? I thought we were."

"Yes, yes, of course. But you're not passing this knowledge on to anyone else?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"And you say Mr. Loring was not here the day of the tea?"

"I can only say that I didn't see him here."

"I believe he telephoned from New York late in the afternoon?"

"Not to my knowledge. I took no message from him."

"Who would be likely, then, to have taken it?"

"Maybe James. If not, then maybe one of the outside waiters we had here."

"Yes; how can I find out?"

"I'll ask James, and if he knows nothing about it I'll ask the outside head waiter."

"All right, Fetter. Do it up at once, will you? Are you going in to the church for the services?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Abercrombie said we could all go. The police people are guarding the house."

"All right. Find out what I want to know before you start. You'll just about have time. Make it snappy now."

Fetter obeyed and found out that James had not taken the telephone message in question, and that none of the extra waiters in attendance had taken it.

Carlisle walked away, cogitating on this.

It began to look as if Loring had not telephoned at all. As if he had come to Graysands secretly, had gone to the tea house, and finding Eileen alone there had managed to introduce the poison into her drink and then take his departure.

Why Eileen also kept his visit a secret was a mystery, but perhaps she hadn't done that intentionally. Perhaps she felt ill at once and asked Loring to leave her at once. Perhaps the Carmichaels or Mr. Robertson came along just then and interrupted the conversation. Perhaps she did mention Loring's presence to Miss Mercer or to Maisie or to Hugh. There were lots of possibilities.

And, anyway, Carlisle couldn't think Loring, a long-time family friend, could be guilty of . . .

But that was a futile argument. It was equally hard, or more so, to think Hugh Abercrombie could be guilty. Or Lorna. Or Maisie.

Well, he had voiced that at last, though only to himself.

Maisie. The madcap, foolhardy, spitfire youngster. Suppose she had flown into a rage with her mother for some piece of maternal despotism and had sought revenge in a moment of anger so fierce as to be a diabolical frenzy.

Absurd? Yes, but what theory wasn't absurd?

Anyway, once he had all possible suspects tagged and labelled he was going to set them up in a row and systematically eliminate the least likely ones.

But now that everyone had left the house for the church Carlisle hastened to make the most of this rare opportunity he had of searching the house alone.

A quick hunt through Loring's traps brought confirmation of his hard-upness in the presence of a few bills and duns in his pockets. But no real clues were forthcoming, and not any of Carlisle's favourite absent clues, unless he was content to count the absence of all clues as an asset. But it didn't get him anywhere.

Another swift search was through the belongings of Eric Redmayne.

Carlisle had no reason to suspect the partner of Abercrombie, but a stone unturned was a thorn in his flesh, so he plunged in.

He found only one thing, and that was, to put it mildly, somewhat illuminating. It was a small box, marked plainly bichloride of mercury, and as he shook it the contents rattled.

Without opening it he put it in his pocket and went on with his search.

But nothing of further interest rewarded his efforts, and he left the room.

Next he went to Miss Mercer's room.

And here he found exactly what he expected to find. The clothing, toilet appointments, and ornamental fripperies of a young woman, not of the social élite, but employed by one of them. The gowns were of good

workmanship but subdued in colouring and plain in effect. The toilet implements scattered about the dressing table were of imitation tortoise shell and included all the accoutrements of a well-ordered bureau. The lingerie, for Carlisle probed deeply, was all new and of modish style though not of expensive material.

Carlisle pondered long over this and smiled several times as he looked at the slips and step-ins.

The bathroom offered perfumes, bath salts, delicately scented soaps, and various lotions and powders, but it was when he opened the medicine cabinet that he received the jolt of his life.

For there, only partly hidden by a larger box, was a small box plainly labelled "bichloride of mercury."

"Good heavens!" he remarked to his perplexed self, "is there a league of poisoners, all combined in one fell intent?"

He drew from his pocket the box he had brought from the room of Redmayne. It was precisely like the box he had just found in Miss Mercer's bathroom. He opened one and then the other. Both contained blue tablets of a peculiar shape. Not round but shaped like a miniature coffin.

Carlisle stared at them, and then common sense came to his rescue. He had heard of the efforts made of late to prevent people from taking poison in the dark by mistake. He had read of the radium bottles that made a mistake unlikely. He had heard of corks that had spiky pin points all over them by way of similar precaution, and he had no doubt that these tablets were of this

gruesome shape to warn anyone seeking a harmless soda mint that he had the wrong drug in his hands.

But, granting all that, why were these deadly things scattered broadcast through the house? He understood the stuff was hard to come by.

Could it be that Redmayne and Miss Mercer were leagued in this dreadful business?

He thought not, yet he could think of no natural and innocent explanation for these twin boxes.

Yet they were in no way concealed. That was a poser. True, Miss Mercer's box had been partly hidden bv another box, but that was not intentional concealment, or if it was it was a poor job of it.

Redmayne's box he had found in his suitcase. It was merely pitched in with some shaving soap and talcum powder, with no attempt at concealment.

Why were these people in possession of a deadly poison, with seemingly no fear of being questioned about it?

Another thought struck him. Could it be that these boxes of tablets were planted? That the real criminal had placed these boxes where they would doubtless be found by investigators?

And in that case, was the criminal Troy Loring?

He was at the house off and on, sometimes staying for days or weeks at a time, then away for a like period.

It was pretty positive he hadn't telephoned when he said he had. Also, if he lied about that it was a safe guess that he had been in the grounds and Percy Van

Antwerp had seen him. And if so, was it not plausible that he had been to see Eileen in the tea house, had found her alone, and had administered the drug?

Then, by way of safeguarding himself, he had placed a box of the poison among the belongings of two innocent people to mislead inquirers.

Far from willing to accept this as a real theory Carlisle put it away in his mind to be looked into, as he had put the other box in his pocket for the same purpose.

He had no desire to hunt again in the rooms of Mr. or Mrs. Abercrombie, and he walked along the hall, wondering if he'd better go to New York at once and see what he could learn of Murgatroyd Loring.

"A man with a name like that ought to be a criminal," he mused. "I'd be one with that tag wished on me! Hello, who's weeping?"

An unmistakable sound of someone in deep distress fell on his ears, and he listened a moment and then concluded it was the uncontrolled sobbing of a young person and knew at once it must be Maisie.

Impulsively he gave a low knock at her door and called out:

"Do let me come in! I'm Ken Carlisle."

A sound of quick footsteps was followed by the unlocking of the door, and Maisie, tear-stained and dishevelled, cried:

"Oh, do come in, do!"

Carlisle went in and she flung the door to behind him and locked it.

"Oh, I can't stand it!" she cried, flinging herself into

a chair and relaxing into an attitude of utter helplessness. "Do help me, won't you?"

"You bet I will." And Carlisle felt he could do battle with dragons if need be. For he sensed that Maisie's trouble just now was not the loss of her mother or the danger hanging over her stepfather.

"Tell me all about it," he urged in a calm, cozy way, and the girl sat up and began to pull herself together.

"It's that—that Mercer person!" she exclaimed.

"You chose the right phrase—that Mercer person," Carlisle said, looking at her sharply.

"Oh, do you know?" Maisie stared back at him.

"Yes—or, that is, I have strong suspicions."

"Well, it's true! She's—he's a man!"

"Yes, a man masquerading in woman's clothes. But, after all, that's nothing for you to get so frantic over."

"Oh, isn't it just? She comes here looking like a Strawberry Barbara, and she's a man! A horrid, beastly man!"

"What did you do, confide in her?"

"Now how did you know that? Say, your brain must be flooded with sunshine! Yes, that's just what I did do."

"Did she try to draw you out?"

"No, I can't say that. But, you see, thinking she was a girl, a woman, I was sort of confidential with her, and I told her my heart's hopes and fears."

"And who you were in love with and all that?"

"Yes, and I s'pose my stories were sorta colourful, and—or—dynamic and all that, and now she had to go and turn out to be a man!"

"Oh, well, forget it. There's no real harm done. And I suspected it of her myself."

"How'd you come to?"

"Mostly because she overdid the use of her vanity case. All girls use make-up a lot, but she was so everlastingly at it and so ostentatious about it that I said to myself, 'methinks the lady doth protest too much.' And then I took a deeper interest in her, and I saw a few little kinks that made me sure she wasn't all our fancy painted her. Now, why? I asked her why, once, and I rather think I scared her. But can you guess why?"

"No, I can't, unless——" Maisie's eyes grew big with horror.

"You mean, unless she is the one who poisoned your mother?"

Carlisle spoke gently, yet he felt he must be plain.

"I don't think she is," he went on, "I can't imagine any motive. Yet neither can I surmise what in the world she is doing here in masquerade."

"Well, I feel better now that somebody else knows it. I just couldn't bear it—all alone."

"Don't moon over it. I'm going to tax her—him with it to-night. I'm taking her, yes, her, out to dinner. And then I'm going to find out who's who and why."

"Oh, pshaw, I want to be around when you spring it on her—him."

"No, you don't. Anyway, you can't. And you're not to say a word to anybody about it. Mind that."

"Why not?"

"Because—now act as if you were a rational human

being—because I'm here to find out about your mother's death. And I can't if I'm hampered in my work. I don't know what Maude Mercer has to do with the matter, but I never shall know if you go around spiking my guns. By the way, her name is really Maude."

"His name is!"

"Yes. I deduced that. He told me he was named for a theatrical celebrity, and I'm sure he means Cyril Maude. See?"

"Oh, yes. And I will say that he has always been very nice to me. All my confidential babble was my own fault. He never pried or asked questions."

"I have a notion he's all right and can explain everything satisfactorily. But you must promise not to betray his secret until I give you leave."

"All right, I promise."

Maisie in this docile, obedient mood was very sweet, and Carlisle left her abruptly lest he fall in love with her.

He went back to the inn and shut himself up in his room to think things out.

He spent the whole afternoon on this job and then went downstairs, engaged a small car, and went in it to Graysands to get Miss Mercer to go out with him.

Apparently all ready for the outing she sat on the porch awaiting him.

The driver of the car stopped at the steps, and Carlisle sprang out and went up on the porch.

He looked curiously at Miss Mercer, who was garbed in a smart sports frock of beige colouring, with a long

voluminous scarf of vivid red wound about her throat.

Her eyes were bright and she rose smilingly to greet him.

Maisie sat near, taking in the scene, and Percy Van Antwerp sat next to Maisie.

Carlisle and Miss Mercer went down the steps, and he handed her into the car. Maisie ran down after her, and Van Antwerp followed more leisurely.

Carlisle got in beside her, and Miss Mercer leaned out of the open car to speak to Maisie.

Percy leaned over, in teasing mood, pretending to listen, and Maisie drew closer to catch Miss Mercer's whispered words.

Then, smiling, she drew back, and the chauffeur started the car.

Miss Mercer said a word of farewell, and Percy drew Maisie away from the car door on which she had been leaning.

As the car gathered speed there was a shriek from Miss Mercer, followed by a smothered groan.

One end of her flowing scarf was whipped over the side of the car and became entangled in the wheel.

It tightened about her neck and as the car gained speed she was dragged out of the machine into the roadway. Her neck was broken and she was picked up dead.

## CHAPTER XIII

### *The Mystery of Maude Mercer*

IT WAS Van Antwerp who sprang forward to lift the huddled figure from the ground, and Carlisle jumped from the car to help him.

The chauffeur had come to a stop as soon as possible on hearing the frightened scream, and he, too, joined the terrified group.

Together the three men lifted the broken body and carried it to the enclosed porch, where they laid it on a couch.

"Fly for Dr. Garth," Van Antwerp said to the white and shaking chauffeur. "There seems to me no hope of life remaining, but it's better to have him here, eh, Ken?"

"Yes, yes," said Carlisle, looking bewildered, "and after that, Bob, go and get Sergeant Downing or somebody from the station. Where's Maisie?"

"Here I am," said a small, weak voice from the depths of a big porch chair. "Oh, what can we do? I feel as if it was my fault. I kept her leaning over the side of the car, talking to her."

"Him, you mean," said Carlisle in a low tone. "There must be no more mummery. Miss Mercer was not a woman, she was a man. The reason for her mas-

querade, I don't know. She—he was going to explain it to me. I feel sure it was all right, though."

"What do you mean, all right?" asked Van Antwerp, a look of utter amazement on his face. "All right to be here in a position of trust and in such a disguise!"

He stared at the piteous wreck of humanity on the couch. The face was only slightly scratched, but the neck was broken, and the head hung awry in ghastly fashion. The torn scarf trailed to the floor, and the smart costume was torn and soiled. The close little hat was still in its place, and the curls of red hair showed from under its narrow brim.

Maisie sat like one paralyzed. She showed no faintness, no sign of collapse, rather a wide-awake interest and curiosity.

"I don't get it," she said. "Why was she pretending to be a woman? What was the big idea? I suppose there was some mysterious secret about her. I mean him. Maybe," her eyes opened wider, "maybe he killed Mother!"

"Don't puzzle over such questions now," Carlisle said. "Is your father at home, Maisie?"

"I don't know. Yes, I think so. He went to his room right after the funeral, and I haven't seen him since."

"It's too bad to bring him down to learn of further tragedy, but it must be done. Maybe you'd better go and tell him, Van."

"I'll go," Maisie said, jumping up. "I'm the best one to do it."

She ran into the house, and Carlisle nodded at Van

Antwerp. "Yes, let her go. Abercrombie must be told, and she's the one to do it. Where's Redmayne, and Loring, too? They must all be told. And the servants. How do you call Fetter?"

Van Antwerp rang the necessary bell and in a moment the butler appeared. Even his imperturbability gave way at sight of the huddled body and he uttered an uncontrollable, "Oh, my God!"

"Yes, Fetter," Carlisle said, "Miss Mercer has been killed. An accident in the motor car. And, Fetter, you must know that Miss Mercer was not a woman, but a man. For a reason he wore woman's garb, but we will call him Mr. Mercer. I am quite sure that was his real name. You didn't know this, did you, Fetter?"

The butler looked embarrassed.

"I didn't know it, sir," he replied, "but we had some suspicions. I forbade the under-servants to gossip about it, but James and I, we had an idea of the truth. And I think Mrs. Abercrombie knew it, sir."

"She did! I'm glad you told me that, Fetter. It makes matters better. If she knew it, then there was a good reason back of it all. Now, the staff must be told, of course, and I wish you'd hunt up Mr. Loring and Mr. Redmayne. Are they in the house?"

"I don't know, sir. I'll find out."

Fetter went away, and Van Antwerp turned to Carlisle with a puzzled stare.

"Why do you think it helps matters that Eileen knew it? I don't like that side of it."

"You think he was some chap Eileen was in love

with?" Carlisle smiled slightly. "I don't think that. I think she engaged him for a purpose, and her purpose required that he should seem to be a woman. But I don't know. Perhaps Mr. Abercrombie can clear the matter up. It's all very odd."

"It most certainly is. I expect you've got another case on your hands now, Ken. Not a mysterious death, but a mysterious life. You searched her room, didn't you, in your general hunt?"

"Yes. And I was convinced then that it was a man's room. Oh, the clothes and things were feminine enough, but there was an atmosphere, an effect . . . No, not that, either. There was an absence of atmosphere and effect that denotes a woman. There were perfume bottles and powders and creams, but none of that faint, elusive scent in the air that is always noticeable in a woman's room."

"H'm, you're rather experienced, aren't you?"

"It's my business to be. And, besides, the theatrical profession is a liberal education in such matters."

"Oh, sure. I forgot that. Just how did the thing happen, Carlisle? I stood right there by the car, but I was looking at Maisie, and then I heard that fearful scream. That was in his rôle of a woman, I think, for it was high pitched, as his voice always was. Then came a groan that was in the man's natural voice! He forgot his rôle in his agony."

Van Antwerp looked awestricken as he thus reasoned out things, and Carlisle nodded his head.

"Yes, Mercer, masquerading for his own reasons,

used that high, artificial voice constantly. And he was a marvellous actor. I was completely fooled at first. Then it was his exaggerations that gave him away. He used his vanity compact so often and so ostentatiously that it didn't ring quite true. Lord knows, the girls use those things a lot, but Mercer was constantly touching up his complexion and always when someone was looking at him. Still, he was very clever, and his clothes were marvels of fineness and beauty. I ran through his wardrobe, and he had the best and latest styles of lingerie and accessories. That scarf, now, look at it, it is of the finest wool, yet so soft and thin that it waves in the breeze. Very long, you see, it was wound round his neck twice. That's why it held. Had it been round only once it would have slipped off and so saved the day. I say, Van, it's the same accident that killed that dancer—what was her name?"

"I don't know. Who do you mean?"

"I can't think of her name, but she was killed in Nice some time ago in just this same way. Her scarf caught in the wheel and dragged her over the side."

"I never heard of it. But it's a strange thing to happen. I don't remember that her scarf hung over the door of the car."

"It must have done so. I didn't notice it, either. I was looking at Maisie, wishing she'd get her arms off the car door before we started. I suppose the strain came on the scarf so suddenly Mercer had no time to put up a fight. And the car gaining speed every second. Well, here's Mr. Abercrombie."

Hugh came in, pale but composed.

"How terrible!" he said, his brows contracting in a spasm of pain as he looked at the pathetic sight. "And what does it mean?" he went on. "Maisie says Miss Mercer was a man."

"Yes," Carlisle returned, and indeed the fact grew more patent with the passing of time. The features seemed more masculine, the absence of the ladylike smile, the disorder of the make-up, all proved that in the last moment of life the mummer had forgotten his rôle and his natural self came into evidence. "You didn't know it?" Carlisle asked.

"No, I had no idea of such a thing. I never noticed my wife's secretary beyond the necessary greetings of the day. I don't think I ever looked at her with any definite interest. Why did he do such a thing?"

"That's what we must learn. It is not impossible that it may be connected in some way with the death of Mrs. Abercrombie."

"How could that be?" Hugh looked startled.

"I don't know yet, but there must be some strong reason for this man's masquerade."

Dr. Garth arrived then and went straight to the couch where the body lay.

His deft manipulations discovered in a few moments all the dreadful facts of the fatality.

"A terrible accident," he said, "but one easily explained and understood. Was the—er—the victim leaning over the side of the car?"

"Yes," Carlisle answered him. "The top was open,

and this long scarf fluttered out over the wheel. But, Dr. Garth, we all know that Miss Mercer was not a woman but a man. Did you know it?"

Garth looked round at the others.

"Yes," he said at last; "yes, I knew it."

"What was the reason for it?" Carlisle asked eagerly.

"Suppose we leave that question for the moment," Dr. Garth said slowly. "Mercer was all right. Nothing crooked about him. Now, what is to be done? You've called the coroner?"

"I've sent word to Downing, he'll take charge."

"All right, but as I see it it was purely an accident. No occasion for an inquest. However, that's up to Garrett. I pronounce this person dead from a broken neck brought about by the catching of a long, firm scarf in the wheel of the starting car. Had the scarf been of lace or chiffon it would have snapped asunder. But that strong, finely knitted wool held and dragged the victim over the side."

They sat in silence and Carlisle contemplated the body. It seemed now that the truth must have been evident. The shoes, though of modish make, were large. The hands were large, and there was a stalwart effect observable.

But Carlisle remembered that the cleverness of Mercer had hidden these points or made them negligible by his fine acting of a feminine part. And by the correct modest demeanour of a properly behaved secretary, not quite an equal, but by no means a servant.

Carlisle was not sure that Dr. Garth's assertion of

Mercer's sincerity of purpose was the truth, but he had no doubt that the doctor thought it was, and he put the question away with others to be decided later.

Downing and Garrett arrived together.

With a brief word of greeting they at once set about their work.

Dr. Garth joined them, and the others retired to another porch.

Redmayne and Loring were added to their number, but Maisie did not reappear. As they awaited the report of the coroner Carlisle told the newcomers the truth about the secretary.

"Incredible!" cried Loring. "That girl a man! I can't believe it. What cleverness! That pale fine skin and that glorious red hair! Of course, I can see how it might be if the chap had a positive genius for impersonation. But why? What's the reason for such a performance?"

"We don't know, Mr. Loring," Carlisle told him. "That's a question we have to find out. Doubtless the explanation will be satisfactory. Dr. Garth assures us that it will."

"How can it? Why, to rig up like that and deceive decent people—it's against the law!"

"Better reserve judgment till we get more data," Carlisle said, frowning at this outburst. "And it's up to Mr. Abercrombie to decide on the merits of the case."

"Not at all. That man, if he was a man, came to my client pretending to be a woman. It's up to me to look into the affair."

"I think not," came Hugh's gentle voice but with a firm note in it. "Mrs. Abercrombie may have been your client but she was my wife, and I am quite capable of looking into her domestic affairs."

Carlisle was secretly glad that Hugh stood up to the lawyer, and he wondered what would be the outcome of it all. Surely the case was becoming a complex one; that is, if the masquerade of Mercer was connected with the death of Eileen. Carlisle had not forgotten the box of poison tablets he had taken from the secretary's room, and he also remembered that he had abstracted another similar box from Redmayne's room.

These things were evidence, but evidence of what?

Carlisle glanced at Redmayne. The man sat with folded arms gazing at Abercrombie. His face wore a slight frown of thoughtfulness, not annoyance, and he seemed to be studying his partner with deep concern.

Carlisle looked at Hugh and didn't wonder at Redmayne's attitude. For Abercrombie was as a man who has reached the end of his rope.

He still showed a firmness of demeanour by the way he sat upright in his chair and held his head aloft with a certain air of defiance; but his dark eyes were sombre and restless, and his nervous fingers moved constantly in a fever of unrest.

"Redmayne's afraid of a breakdown there," Carlisle surmised as he pondered to himself. "But I don't look for one. Abercrombie is his own man. He's a nervous temperament but a staunch holdfast, to my way of thinking."

"You may as well decide, Hugh," Redmayne was saying, "what disposition should be made of the body. You don't want to keep it here. Perhaps Dr. Garth will advise us."

"I want to do the right thing," Hugh said straightforwardly. "If we can't find out Mercer's relatives or friends to-night we surely can to-morrow. As to the body—do whatever Dr. Garth advises. There are plenty of empty rooms and, of course, the room he has been occupying. Do whatever you think best, Red."

"I think we must try at once to find out Mercer's New York address and something about his people. I'll take that on, Hugh; don't bother your head about it. And here's Fetter to announce dinner, I expect. Let us all go to the dining room. The doctor can join us there when he is ready."

Redmayne's common-sense advice was followed, and when they reached the table Maisie sat there in her place at the head.

Carlisle and Van Antwerp willingly accepted an invitation to remain and did ample justice to a first-class dinner.

Hugh ate little, still wearing that air of baffled bewilderment, yet alert enough when spoken to.

Before the meal was half over Dr. Garth appeared and took a seat with them.

"There is no need for an inquest," he said. "It was clearly an accident—just such an accident as happened to that well-known dancer in Nice some time ago. The scarf was a long and very strong one. Its fringe be-

came entangled in the spokes of the wheel, and as the car gained speed Mercer was dragged out and his neck was broken. I have known Mercer was a man for some time. Mrs. Abercrombie knew it when she engaged him. He was really a detective."

"What?" cried Loring. "Whatever did she hire a detective for?"

It suddenly occurred to Carlisle it might have been because Mrs. Abercrombie doubted the honesty of her lawyer. But it seemed absurd to employ a detective for that reason. He concluded to await further developments before forming any conclusions.

"That I can't say," returned Garth diplomatically. "But Mercer was a young man from a detective agency in the city. Mrs. Abercrombie engaged him, knowing his sex and desiring him to pose as a woman. I think that is all I can tell you of the matter."

Carlisle quickly noted that the doctor did not say that was all he knew of the matter, but it was all he was willing to tell.

"And so," Garth went on, "you will be spared the annoyance of an inquest, and the body will be removed at once, if you wish."

"If Mercer was from an agency it will be easy to get in touch with them," suggested Redmayne.

"Doubtless," agreed Dr. Garth. "Will not the address of the agency be found in Mrs. Abercrombie's notebook? Or perhaps letters from the firm."

"Very likely," Redmayne said. "Shall I look?" he turned to Hugh.

"I'll look," interrupted Loring. "It's my place to do so. You chaps seem to forget that I'm Eileen's lawyer and representative."

"And you seem to forget, Troy, that I'm her husband and therefore her representative." Hugh spoke coldly and even sternly.

"I forget nothing, Hugh," Loring said almost insolently, but as he glanced at Abercrombie's lowering face he dropped his eyes and became silent.

"A mighty uncertain crowd," Carlisle mused. "Seems to me I can't quite separate the sheep from the goats. This will take some thinking over. Guess I'd better go home and study it out."

It was characteristic of Kenneth Carlisle that when he received a lot of facts or even impressions he wanted to run off by himself and tabulate and study them out. He felt all mixed up until he had cleared his desk mentally. And now he felt he had just about all he could stand up under.

Dinner over, he decided to delay long enough to get a report from the detective agency about Mercer and then cut for home.

Redmayne and Loring went together to Eileen's room to hunt for the address.

Outwardly friendly but inwardly at odds the two hunted for address books or filed letters.

Carlisle, on a sudden impulse, went to the room Mercer had occupied, but his search there brought forth no results in the way of information about his real identity. No letters or diary rewarded the detective's

hunting, and he concluded that Mercer was a very astute young man. He thought, too, that doubtless Maude was his real name, and that he had been christened Cyril Maude after the famous English actor. It would be interesting, if not important, to learn about his talent for feminine impersonation.

He went to the lounge, where most of the men were assembled. Maisie was there, too, a subdued, child-like Maisie, who clung to her stepfather.

As a matter of fact, the girl, modern and self-reliant though she was, felt suddenly alone in the world. She longed for a feminine companion and she sadly missed her mother. It had come to her, of late, that Miss Mercer was a man, and Carlisle had merely verified her own suspicions. But she was not deeply affected by the discovery, and though she had been somewhat confidential with the supposed lady secretary she had not made any confidences of any importance or that she greatly regretted. She felt most the deprivation of the secretary's companionship in the guise of a woman. And she was wondering if she ought not to engage the services of some companion or chaperon for the sake of having one of her own sex in the family circle.

But she had a strong hope that some day her stepfather would marry Lorna Garth. Maisie's sense of honour was far from high, and she had no censure in her heart for Hugh because he had loved Lorna more than he had his wife.

Maisie, brought up in the most modern of conditions, thought divorce and remarriage quite in the proper

scheme of things. And though she had loved her mother in a chummy sort of way she hadn't very deep heart sorrow at her loss, and she didn't see why her father should regret it at all. The girl was not a monster but a heedless, heartless child without a feeling of responsibility to anyone but her adored self.

The death of Mercer was a shock to her sensibilities, and the horror of it unnerved her, but she felt little if any real grief.

At twenty she was old and experienced in worldly wisdom, but she had the heart of a child; if there were depths of feeling in it they had never yet been stirred.

Redmayne returned from his quest.

"I got hold of the place," he said; "the agency, I mean. We found a sort of private notebook of Eileen's that had addresses in it, and there was the Lawton Agency, and beneath it was scribbled the name Mercer. So we assumed we were on the right track, and we were."

"I called them up," Loring cut in, childishly anxious to get into the limelight. "They are open all round the clock. A fine institution, I gathered from their way of talking."

"What did they say?" asked Hugh, a little impatiently.

"Said that Mrs. Abercrombie had come to them for a detective some weeks ago."

"What did they say she wanted a detective for?"

"They didn't tell me that. They said she wanted a very clever person, and they suggested this Mercer

chap, who made a specialty of impersonating a woman. I said I understood that was illegal, and they said rather loftily that they attended to that side of the question. So it must be they get a special dispensation."

"It can be done," said Redmayne quietly.

"Well, anyway, Eileen agreed, and they sent Mercer down here as a woman. And he carried it through pretty well, if you ask me."

"But why did Eileen do it?" Hugh persisted.

"We'll have to go to see the agency people and find out all about it," Redmayne said soothingly. "I'll go to-morrow, Hugh. I'll go now if you want me to. They're open all night."

"Oh, no, never mind. To-morrow will do," Abercrombie returned.

"Well," Dr. Garth asked, "did they know Mercer's home address or anything about his people?"

"Yes, they told me that, and they said they would communicate with his sister, and she will doubtless come out here to-morrow or telephone instructions."

"Then keep the body here," Hugh advised. "It seems more decent. Mercer was a good sort, man or woman. His sister would rather come here than go to a morgue or mortuary place."

"Very kindly of you, Hugh," the doctor said. "I'm glad you decided on that. I'll send the local undertaker along now, and I'll look in to-morrow. You all right, Maisie girl?"

"Yes, Dr. Garth." And a sad-eyed little face came up

out of the depths of the big armchair where she was hidden. "Only please don't let any more of these dreadful things happen. I can't stand many such shocks."

"I don't blame you, dear." And the doctor looked kindly at her. He had known her many years, and beneath her flippant wilfulness he thought he discerned something of her mother's fine nature.

Dr. Garth had his own troubles. He was fully aware how matters stood between his daughter and Hugh Abercrombie. He knew how they had fought it, knew how hard they had tried to crush it, to conquer it, to do right by Eileen. He knew, too, that of late they were breaking under the strain, and he had often wondered what the result would be.

He sighed, and patted Maisie's curly head; then with a brief good-night he went away.

"I suppose we'd better go, Ken," Van Antwerp said, rising. "Unless you've any further inquiries to make over here."

"No," Carlisle said. "This tragedy seems to offer no scope for inquiry. It is what the juries used to call an 'act of God.' No human instrument brought about Mercer's awful fate, and no inquiry can help matters. Come along, Perc, I'm ready."

## CHAPTER XIV

### *A Note Found in a Hat*

"You see, Van, it's this way," Carlisle said as the two friends forgathered in his room on their return from Graysands. "Of course I'm horrified at the awfulness of that accident to Mercer and all that. I hope I have enough of the milk of human kindness to feel honestly grieved at the poor chap's death, but I'm also sorry that it occurred before he and I had our little dinner party."

"Why, for heavens' sake? You liked him as much as all that?"

"He was going to tell me something. He was going to tell me why Mrs. Abercrombie engaged him as a detective and especially why she wanted him to dress as a woman."

"I'd like to know that. I don't get it at all—that Eileen should do that. But it must have been because as a woman she could easily see him alone and learn what he had done in the matter she wanted him for, whatever it was."

"That must be the explanation. She couldn't have a man detective in the house without everybody know-

ing it. But a lady secretary would evoke no comment, and, as you say, Eileen could have private interviews unquestioned. Now what did she want Mercer to find out?"

"Loring's dishonesty," returned Van Antwerp promptly. "I can't swear to it, of course, but I suspect that Troy was mishandling her funds or doctoring the accounts in some way. Eileen couldn't prove this on him herself; it wasn't the sort of thing she could put up to Hugh; and so she set to work in her own way to get at the truth."

"Maybe you're right," Carlisle said dubiously, "but I'm not sure. It was an elaborate performance to find out a simple thing like a defalcation. An expert accountant could have set her mind at rest in short order."

"It looks that way to a man but not to a woman. Eileen was elaborate in any undertaking. And what else could have been her reason?"

"For the Mercer proposition? Why, I think it stares one in the face! Simply screams itself at us. She wanted someone to spy on Hugh and Lorna."

"Can't think it. When it came to a matter of that sort Eileen would do her own spying. She was quite capable of it, and she could learn more in a day than an outsider like that could in a thousand years."

"I'm not so sure. Mercer would have a chance to spy round in places and at times that a wife couldn't. But it doesn't matter. The agency will doubtless settle that question. My regret is that I had hoped to learn

something from Mercer that would help me with the mystery of Mrs. Abercrombie's death. I rather imagine Mercer was a good detective, and he had some important knowledge about that poisoning business."

"You think that! Then he ought to have told what he knew."

"I think he was ready to. I think he meant to tell me at dinner to-night what he knew or suspected. That's why I'm so upset at his death, aside from the grief and horror of it."

"But, good Lord, Ken, you don't need the help of an amateur! Mercer wasn't a real detective; his suspicions wouldn't have been of much use to you."

"You never can tell. He might have known facts that I can never get hold of. He knew all the people in the house."

"So do I."

"Well, give me a lead then."

"Oho, you come to Watson for advice! Well, old chap, I only wish I could help you, but the only avenues of suspicion that stare me in the face, as you phrase it, or simply scream at me, are avenues that I refuse to walk on."

"Your language is a trifle flowery, but I gather that, for you, suspicion points a way you don't wish to look."

"Exactly that. Evidence, clues, indications even, are so misleading and so full of error I decline to follow them. If you know any facts I'll consider them, but I don't want to hear any surmises, theories, or pipe-dreams. I have every confidence in your cleverness and

perspicacity, but I won't go off on a wild-goose chase of deductions with nothing to bolster 'em up."

"I get you, and that's pretty much the way I look at things myself. Now, you see, I've pretty much gathered up all the facts available. I've looked into motives and opportunities. I've sized up the characters of the principal players. And I'm ready to tabulate and formulate and investigate."

"Gosh, you're talking like a real live detective!"

"I am a real live detective. What did you think I was? A fancy sleuth with a monocle and a bored yawn? No, sir. I may have been a film star, effete and effulgent, but that's all over now. I'm a worker, a digger, in my chosen field. And I'll begin with you. Why did you slyly abstract that cigarette holder and whip it into your pocket when we were in the tea house?"

"Me! Oh, my Lord! you scared the life out of me! Not your question but the suddenness of it. Why, that was an attempt to give you a jolt. It was my own holder I had left in there a few days before. The imp of mischief got into me, and I took it stealthily to see if that would stir you up. I thought it hadn't done so until I felt you pull the thing slyly out of my pocket and then slyly put it back again. As a joke it didn't come off very well, but I did fool you."

"Silly ass! I thought you knew when I scooped it out of your pocket, though you never batted an eyelash. You'll never get over your schoolboy pranks!"

"I won't do that sort of thing again, Ken. It was silly. Now, tell me more about your tabulating and all

that. Have you struck the perfect problem? The flawless crime?"

"The flawless crime is all bunk. No one can invent a perfect crime. The thing to do is to commit a casual crime."

"Just what does that mean?"

"One where everything seems casual, as if it happened in the natural course of events."

"You are smart, Ken." Van Antwerp looked his admiration. "I suppose you mean the criminal so arranges his deeds that they look as if they occurred without his planning."

"That's it exactly. Now, you see, Perc, if our murderer gave Mrs. Abercrombie that poison in her highball he—or she—counted on its not being noticed because it was the natural course of events for her to take a highball on occasion. The occasion being when she was tired with a social event of some sort."

"Heavens, Carlisle, why did you put in that 'she'? You don't, you can't suspect a woman!"

"Why not? The first one to come in contact with Mrs. Abercrombie was Corinne, the maid. I don't count Fetter. And, too, just before that Maisie was there."

Carlisle watched closely to see the reaction to this last name.

But instead of an angry outbreak, as he had expected, Van Antwerp sat and stared at him.

"You mean—you think——" Words failed him.

"Oh, brace up, Van," Carlisle said. "I'm not making

any accusation. I only say I have to get my facts licked into shape, and Maisie was there the last one before Fetter came, and Corinne the first one afterward."

"But—but it's too—too——"

"Too absurd to think Maisie killed her mother? Yes, I know it. But we have to take the absurdities into consideration as well as the likelihoods. Now, I don't believe you can help me. You're too ready to fly off on a tangent when I mention anything that doesn't appeal to your predilections. You're a good chap, Van, but you're too close to the whole family to be an unprejudiced observer."

"There are other people in that house besides the family," Van Antwerp muttered. "But you're so keen to pin the thing on Hugh or on Maisie that you're blind to any other possibilities."

"For instance?"

"Troy Loring is a more likely suspect than those you have your claws into. Or even Redmayne. Or Mercer himself. You know nothing of him."

"But, my dear boy, what conceivable reason could a stranger, a detective, have to murder his employer?"

"You know nothing about him," said Van Antwerp doggedly. "You've no idea what he was there for. That detective racket may have been a blind."

"I'm willing to consider all that. But we'll learn those facts when the agency is questioned or when the sister comes. And I'm willing to look into Loring's past. But Redmayne is too absurd."

"There you go! Anyone you think is absurd is out

of the question. Anyone I think absurd is a probable criminal!"

"I don't want to be unjust, old chap. As I said, I've just got ready to straighten out my findings and tabulate my evidence."

"You haven't got any evidence."

"That's true."

"Have you got any clues?"

"Not a clue."

"What have you got? Faith in your star? Confidence in your skill? Or do you depend on luck?"

"You said it! Luck and gumption, that's all a detective really needs. If he has intuition, perspicacity, deductive powers—all that sort of thing, so much the better. But gumption and luck fill the bill."

"Joy go with you, then. You're right, I can't help you. Unless you lay off Hugh and Maisie. There, my cards are on the table."

"I don't blame you a bit, Perc. It must be fierce for you to have their names mentioned as suspects. Now, I'll tell you what. I won't ask you a thing about them, but if you get a hint of news about anyone else you tell me, won't you?"

"You bet I will. And I'll dig up something, too."

"Do. What's become of that vaunted psychology of yours?"

"I dunno, Ken. This whole thing has knocked me galley-west. And now this ghastly Mercer business."

"Oh, well, an accident, horrible though it is, can't be considered important compared to our murder case."

"It's all horrible. I wish to heaven it could be dropped entirely. Look here, Ken. If Eileen was murdered it was either by someone of her own family or else it wasn't. Now, if it wasn't, why worry? She can't be brought back to life. And if it was one of her own then surely it's better left undiscovered. She wouldn't want all this probing and digging."

"You're not looking at it in the right way, Van. At present, the police and many others strongly suspect Hugh Abercrombie of getting rid of his wife in order to marry Lorna Garth. That's the case in plain language. Now, is it not better to clear Hugh, for surely you agree he can be cleared if he is innocent?"

"Not necessarily. That's just it. How many innocent people are adjudged guilty?"

"He's adjudged guilty now," Carlisle said gravely. "The police have been waiting until after the funeral——"

"To arrest him?"

"I don't know, Perc. They are of two minds about it. They haven't real evidence, you see. And, another thing, I don't know how this Mercer accident will react on the case."

"Just what do you mean?"

"Just what I say. It may have a bearing, and it may not. You see Mercer, being a detective, may have a report cached somewhere, and that report may have in it some evidence that will bear on the other matter."

"Yes." Percy shook his head with a bitter smile. "Yes, I'll say it will have evidence. If there's evidence

against Loring it will begin to open your eyes to the fact that he may be the criminal. He may be the man who cooked up a casual crime. And don't forget that a very round sum of money comes to him at Eileen's death."

"There's motive, I admit. Is Loring hard up?"

"Not dead broke, but I've never known him when he wasn't more or less hard up. He lives from hand to mouth, and he sponges on the Abercrombies all he can."

"He's a mighty unpleasant personality, but . . . Oh, I say, Van, you told me you saw him in the grounds the day of the tea."

"Yes, why?"

"Are you sure?"

"Why, yes. But when you jump at me that way I doubt my own name."

"Don't be silly. Where did you see him?"

"Not at all to speak to. But he was playing tennis as I went past the courts, and he passed us as Maisie and I were walking in the Italian garden. What of it?"

"Only that he told me he didn't come here at all that day."

"Whew!" Percy whistled. "Now why in the world would he say that?"

"I wonder. Could you have been mistaken?"

"Why, I suppose I might, but it's unlikely. Of course I gave him no thought, just saw him as I saw dozens of other men, without really noticing. But Eileen expected him."

"He says he telephoned her he couldn't come."

"Then you can track that down. Who took the telephone call?"

"That's what I can't find out. Nobody seems to have done so. I've asked the servants."

"H'm. A little fishy! Well, if Troy was here and pretended he wasn't that seems to me something to work on."

"It is something to work on. He says he dined at his club and came down here the next day."

"Well, maybe he did. I could be mistaken, of course. But I don't like that telephone message that was never received."

"Nor I. The case is a hard one because of its very vagueness. There's so little to get hold of. But I like a hard case, and I'm hoping that soon a light will break through and things will clear up. Run along now, Percy. I want to think over some matters by myself before Downing comes. And I expect him soon. Don't mind being fired, do you?"

"Not a bit. And honestly, Ken, I wish I could help. But I'm worse than useless at hounding down the people I love."

"Can't blame you for that. Well, we'll hope they'll be exonerated before long."

Van Antwerp went off, and Carlisle sat down for a few moments' concentration.

His thoughts centred round Hugh Abercrombie.

"He can't be a murderer," was the tenor of Carlisle's ruminations. "He is a dreamer, a sensitive plant, a squire of dames—and I mean that in the old, chivalrous sense,

for he's not the Lothario type. I haven't registered emotions for five years not to read character when it is spread before me. That Abercrombie man couldn't kill anybody to save his life.

"He didn't love his wife, and yet he didn't hate her. It isn't in him to hate. She knew how he felt toward her.

"I believe that chap could have said, like old Samuel Pepys:

> "She finds, with reason, that in the company of other women I love, I do not value her or mind her as I ought.

"That's it, he didn't value her or mind her as he ought. But for other women I suppose we must read only Lorna Garth.

Wonder what will happen to that precious pair? I hope to goodness after a decent time passes they can be united.

"Of course, he is not the murderer. But then, who is?

"There's Loring, to be sure."

A tap at the door interrupted his cogitations.

Downing entered, looking very determined of face.

"Well, Mr. Carlisle," he began, "as you know, I've been waiting till after the funeral of Mrs. Abercrombie, and now that it's over here's this other trouble."

"'One woe doth tread upon another's heels, so fast they follow.'"

"Yes, that's the how of it. Now this Mercer matter's a queer thing."

"Very queer. Does it help any in the other inquiry?"

"Well, we found a letter."

"A letter?"

"Yes, on the dead man. The Mercer chap. Tucked away in the lining of the hat he wore. Lady's hat, you know."

"Yes, I know. What was in the letter?"

"Quite a lot. Said he . . . Well, I brought it along."

"Let me see it," said Carlisle, heroically concealing his impatience at Downing's slow movements.

At last he had the letter in his hands and read:

To the Police:

Should I be found dead or injured I wish a few facts recorded. I am Cyril Maude Mercer, a detective connected with the Lawton Agency. I am at Graysands on the invitation of Mrs. Hugh Abercrombie, who engaged my services to discover whether there was any undue intimacy between her husband and Miss Lorna Garth. I was asked to disguise myself as a woman in order that it might be easier for Mrs. Abercrombie to hold secret session with me as to the work I was doing for her. I have endeavoured in all ways to meet the wishes of my employer and to follow the instructions of the agency while at the same time doing nothing that was beneath my dignity or in any way an affront to my manhood. I am especially adapted to this sort of disguise, having taken girls' parts in many plays at school and college, and I pride myself on careful attention to detail. I am writing this because I have a feeling, a sort of premonition, that I have an enemy, one who even seeks to take my life, and who may yet do so, using the same means used to take the life of Mrs. Abercrombie. Should this fate overtake me please notify the agency and send word to my sister. I shall enclose these addresses, but I shall not yet write down the name of the one I suspect of murderous intent. I may do so later, or I may reveal it to the new detective who has recently arrived. I have a feeling Mr. Carlisle is on the right track and will bring to justice the murderer of the worthy and lovely lady, Mrs. Abercrombie.

(Signed) Cyril Maude Mercer.

"Well," said Carlisle, his eyes sombre as he finished reading the strange screed and looked up at Downing.

That worthy wriggled a little in his chair and spoke out boldly.

"Well, there you are, Mr. Carlisle. That Mr. Mercer, he meant to confide in you to-night, he did, and look what happened! I declare if it ain't too bad. Just when we had our hands on the villain, so to speak, the one who really knew the truth had to go and get killed. Well, of course, now he can't be murdered, as he expected to be, but it's a pity, for if he had told you what he had to tell and what he ought to have told long ago we could like as not have prevented his getting murdered. But that terrible thing had to happen, and, as I say, there you are."

"And where am I, Mr. Downing?"

"Well, I don't know for sure where you are, but I know where I am."

"And that is?"

"Just where I started out: in a full and firm belief that Hugh Abercrombie killed his wife. Why? So's he could marry the Garth girl. There's the whole thing in a nutshell."

"I don't think Hugh Abercrombie is of the murdering kind."

"Oh, you don't! And just what is the murdering kind? Do they have a particular way of brushing their hair, or do they wear a certain coloured tie or how do you tell 'em?"

"Your sarcasm is truly withering, Sergeant, but there

are marks borne by a murderer that are absent from the personality of Abercrombie."

"Never mind that balderdash, Mr. Carlisle. You talk about personality. Next thing you'll bring up temperament or complex or fixation or Lord knows what!"

"You have the jargon on your own tongue's end!" And Carlisle smiled in spite of himself.

"I ought to, I've heard it babbled often enough. But there's nothing in it. You can have all your psychoanalysis business. Give me a good clue or a bit of evidence, and I'll bring in my man."

"Got good clues and evidence?"

"No, that's what jars me so."

"Well, lay off Mr. Abercrombie for the moment, and I'll tell you some few things I've rounded up. What about Mr. Loring?"

"As the criminal?"

"Yes."

"I'm willing enough if there's anything to bite on. Is there?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. But Loring's an ugly brute, and he's ready to condemn Abercrombie. Loring gets a big legacy, and he is more or less hard up. He may or may not have juggled the accounts which he always kept for Mrs. Abercrombie since he had full charge of her estate. Loring says he didn't come out to Graysands the day of the garden tea, but others say they saw him here. He says he telephoned that he couldn't come till next day, but nobody can be found who took that telephone message and carried it to Mrs. Aber-

crombie. Now I make no charges, but I ask you if there isn't more evidence there than there is against Hugh Abercrombie?"

"We haven't got one bit of evidence against Mr. Abercrombie except his motive. That goes for Miss Garth, too, though no one has breathed suspicion against her, unless in collusion with him. Now as to Loring. Seems to me you've got a heap of things against him, or if not actually against him, at least questionable things."

"Yes, that's just what it is, questionable. Will you get answers to the questions?"

"I'll try to. I'll take them up at once and do my best. 'Course, I can't do anything till morning."

"Of course not. Now, Downing, have you any leanings toward Eric Redmayne in the rôle of poisoner?"

"Heavens and earth, no. Are you crazy?"

"Not quite. But I found a box of tablets of bichloride of mercury in his suitcase."

"You did? Then they were put there. Planted!"

"That was my idea. For they were not hidden at all. Just thrown in with soap and powder and such."

"Planted, of course. Now, who did that? You see, it's narrowing down to somebody living in the house."

"Yes, it would seem so. Also, I found a similar box in the medicine cabinet of Mercer's bathroom."

"When were all these findings?"

"This afternoon while the family were at the funeral. I had a general rummage."

"All right, the second box was planted, too. For I

searched all those rooms myself before to-day, and those things you speak of were not there."

"No? All right—planted, then. Now, by whom?"

"Yes, that's right, by whom?"

The two men stared straight into one another's eyes. Each waited for the other to voice the thought in both minds. Each waited for the other to breathe the name on both tongues.

At last Carlisle said in a low tone, "What price Maisie?"

"Oh, my God, you've said it!" groaned Downing. "We're all thinking it over at the station. Is it possible?"

"It's possible," Carlisle said in a cool, calm manner, "but I can't think it at all probable."

"It must be looked into," said Downing heavily, and Carlisle nodded assent.

## CHAPTER XV

### *The Fringe on the Scarf*

"But I thought you were so sure Mr. Abercrombie did the deed," Carlisle said to the sergeant.

"I was and I am. But if evidence turns in a new direction we've got to follow it up."

"In a way it's the first real evidence we've run up against," said Carlisle, speaking ruminatively. "If those boxes of poison were planted in those two rooms to-day —on the face of things it looks as if Maisie did it. Now, hold on, Downing, that doesn't make Maisie the murderer, you know."

"Why doesn't it?"

"She may have put those tablets where they were found to shield somebody—her father, for instance."

"Yes. She's terribly fond of Abercrombie, though of course he's only her stepfather. But she was at home during the time of the funeral, so it looks as if she put the things in those two rooms in order to implicate Mercer and Loring."

"Why two of them?"

"Oh, to muddle things up. That girl is a clever little piece—abnormally clever, I think. She's beginning to see the net is drawing in around Abercrombie, and she

takes it into her head to turn suspicion elsewhere. Anywhere else, so long as it's away from him."

"She loved her mother?"

"Yes, I guess so. But she adores the old man. And I think that in her heart she suspects him, only she doesn't want him found out."

"She's a queer make-up."

"She's all of that. And she's been brought up in a hectic atmosphere. Mrs. Abercrombie was one of those ultra-modern women and pretended to be much younger than she really was. She carried it off, too, and she cut up like a young girl, but did it so well that she never was laughed at. You get what I mean?"

"Yes, mostly. And this made Maisie wise to all sorts of cleverness."

"Sure. And she was wise to her father's little affair with the Garth girl. Not that that was really an affair. They were never talked about in society."

"How in the world do you know that?"

"You bet I'd know it if they had been! That's my business. I've long looked for a bust-up of some sort, and I kept my eyes peeled on the actions of all the parties concerned. I wasn't overcome with surprise when Mrs. Abercrombie was poisoned, and I haven't any doubt as to who did it. But we've got to look into every hole and corner, and if, as I suspect, that kid has been putting poison tablets around here and there it's to lead us up a wrong trail."

"Where could she have got the things?"

"I don't know, but there seem to be plenty about.

Must be a source of easy supply somewhere. Dr. Garth's laboratory, maybe. That girl is smart enough to get some that way."

A telephone ring interrupted their conversation.

Carlisle answered it and was told that the chauffeur, Bob, wanted to see him.

"Send him up," he directed, and turned back to Downing.

"That's the chap who was to take Miss Mercer and me over to the Roadside Inn to dinner to-night."

"Did you get any dinner?"

"Oh, yes, stayed at Graysands. Hello, here's Bob."

He opened the door to admit the chauffeur, a strongly built young man with a shrewd, good-natured face.

"Find anything?" Carlisle asked, and then turning to Downing said, "Bob McCoy—Sergeant Downing. I asked him to search the car for any possible scrap of evidence he might find. How about it, Bob?"

"Well, sir, there was nothing in the car. No glove or handkerchief or that sort of thing. The handbag Miss —Mr. Mercer carried I picked up from the ground and turned over to the young lady."

"To Miss Abercrombie?" cried Downing, amazed. "Why didn't you give it to the police?"

"Gosh, there wasn't any police there then. And the young lady held out her hand for it so I let her take it. Why not?"

"Oh, all right," said Carlisle hastily, with a glance at Downing. "Now, what did you find that brought you up here to tell us about it?"

"It's—it's pretty fierce, sir." The youth's voice quivered and he looked frightened.

"Well, out with it," said Carlisle in a kindly, encouraging tone. "We'll judge of its importance."

"You know that long worsted scarf—it got caught in the wheel, you know."

"Yes, I know it did. And it was so firm and strong it pulled——"

"Yes, yes." Bob grew excited. "Yes, that's right, but, Mr. Carlisle, you know it had long fringe on the end, that scarf did."

"Yes, I know that."

"Well, sir, that fringe got caught in the wheel all right, but—but it was tied—tied, sir, around the wires."

"What wires?"

"The wheel, the car has wire wheels, you see, and the fringe got all twisted in among 'em."

"Yes, I know, that's what caused the accident."

"'Course it did. But the tassels—the fringes, you know, was tied—somebody tied 'em."

"Do you know what you're talking about, son?" said Downing, looking at Bob piercingly.

"Yes, I do. And that's what I'm trying to tell you. That there fringe was tied in a knot. Tied round the wires."

"Yes, you said that before. Now, how do you know?"

"I seen it! I been a cleanin' up the car, and when I began to pull off the bits of red wool stickin' to the left rear wheel I couldn't get 'em off 'cause they was tied on."

"You mean somebody tied that scarf to the wheel?"

"Got it in one!" But Bob did not smile; he looked very serious.

"Couldn't be did." Carlisle shook his head. "But we'll go down and take a look at said wheel."

"No, you can't. I had to get the stuff off and clean up the car. Henry's gone off in it."

"Do you mean to say," Carlisle scowled at him, "that you destroyed evidence?"

"I don't know what you mean—evidence. It was my job to clean that car and I done it. And I got my supper and here I am."

"Well, I think it's all a pipe-dream. That fringe got twisted in your old wires, as we all know. And it was so twisted in that it seemed to be tied."

"Yeah, but looky here, mister, I was there, wasn't I? I was drivin' that there car with you in it and the lady that was a man and all that. Now I know all about that accident; I was to it. And I ask you, what started that scarf to get into that wheel?"

"Why, the wind blew it over the side of the car—it was an open car, you know. And it was a long scarf. And it blew over the side and blew against the wheel. Then when the car started the fringe caught in the crossed wire spokes and hung on so that the turning wheel dragged that scarf tighter and tighter until it simply had to pull Mr. Mercer out of the car."

"All O. K. except that they wasn't any wind. We were under the porte-cochère, as you know, and there wasn't a bit of wind."

"Well, that doesn't matter." Carlisle grew impatient. "The scarf hung over the side of the car against the wheel. Wind or not, it hung against those wire spokes and got caught in them. It isn't an unheard-of case. There was a dancer in——"

"I know," said Bob, "I've heard over and over again 'bout that dancin' lady, but, Mr. Carlisle, I cleaned that car. I saw those pieces of fringe in the wheel, and I tell you they was tied in."

"All right, if you know so much, who tied them in?"

"Well, there's only four people as could have done it."

"Four! Who?"

"Miss Abercrombie, Mr. Van Antwerp, and you, and me."

Carlisle stared at the lad. He was young for a chauffeur, but he was acknowledged one of the best. And many guests using the cars of the Abercrombie Arms stipulated that Bob should drive them.

"We all had opportunity?" asked Carlisle in a curiously low voice.

"Yes, we did. The lady—I can't help calling her that—I mean Mr. Mercer, got in first. You stood by her side a minute after you handed her in, asking her where we was to go. Then you went round behind the car and got in the other side. I stood beside her next, while she was givin' me directions to the place we was goin'. Well, then Miss Abercrombie came runnin' down from the piazza and leaned on the car door talkin' and half-sobbin' kinder hysterical like. I knew she didn't

go to her mother's funeral—us chofers hears all the news —and I was lookin' at her sorta and sizin' her up. Well, she was holdin' on to the end of that there scarf, twiddlin' it in her fingers, while she babbled on. Then Mr. Van Antwerp he came lopin' down the steps, and he stood 'longside of Miss Maisie. He was kinda soothin' her like and pattin' her on the shoulder for the kid was mighty hi-sterickal. Then you says, 'Get along, Bob,' and I turned my attention to my wheel. And that's all I know about it. But I tell you them pieces of fringe was tied on."

"And I tell you they weren't," Carlisle declared. "You want to stir up a sensation, but you can't put it over, Bob. Those crossed wire spokes could twist and twine that fringe so that it would be practically tied on, but it was not tied on by human fingers."

"Glad to hear you say that, sir. I felt it my duty to tell you."

"Duty be hanged! You felt it your duty to kick up a bobbery, and you tried your best. But it doesn't click. Now, off with you, and don't you dare tell anybody else this cock-and-bull story! Get that?"

"Yes, sir."

"If you so much as let out a peep about it you'll never drive me again, and you'll lose your job at this inn. And you'll have no references. Are you wise?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then run along, Bob. I'm not annoyed—you did right to tell me what you thought was the truth. But the truth is that the scarf got caught by accident; it

wasn't tied in on purpose. And remember you're not to spread that story."

Enriched by a generous souvenir of the occasion Bob went away, silenced but far from convinced.

He would have felt better satisfied had he heard the talk of the two men he had just left.

"Black murder," said Downing briefly. "And two people who could have done it."

"And lots of people who might, could, would, or should have cut up a trick to make it look like murder. Before you fly off on a tangent, Downing, remember those bits of fringe could have been tied by anybody after that car was back in the garage here while Bob was eating his supper. I'll bet he ate his supper before he cleaned the car."

"And you think some smarty came sneaking around and tied the fringe into knots—what for?"

"To make it look as if it had been done with murderous intent and to implicate the two people whom you already consider implicated."

"Don't you?"

Carlisle sat down. He had been pacing the room, and he looked grave and very determined.

"I'm not dodging the issue, Downing. You think this adds colour to the vague doubts we had of Maisie?"

"Mr. Van Antwerp was right there, too."

"Yes, and so was I, and so was the chauffeur. Oh, you can grill Percy Van Antwerp, and I will, too, but I can't hope to run him in ahead of Maisie Abercrombie."

"Then you believe Bob's story of the tied-in fringe?"

"Why, how can we disbelieve it? I said to him that it twisted itself in the wires, but he's a sharp fellow, and I can't think he imagined his yarn."

"You said that to shut him up?"

"Of course. But I think he was on to that. However, that doesn't matter, but I don't want him to chatter about it. You see, Downing, we're up against a master mind, a big grain."

"A super-criminal?"

"I'm not fond of that word, but it's partly expressive. I mean a mentality that can conceive and carry out a casual crime, a crime that leaves no clues, no evidence, that seems to have just happened, in the ordinary course of events. Now if our criminal had tied those fringes in the wheel and made a murder look like an accident it would have been about the biggest stunt I ever saw pulled off. But Van Antwerp isn't any such genius as that, and as to Maisie——"

"Well, as to Maisie. Have you never heard in your psychoanalysis of the diabolical cleverness of young girls?"

"You mean the mischievous, sly, cunning tricks. But that's the work of kids, I mean girls of twelve or fourteen, that you have in mind. Maisie's too old for such things. If she's at the bottom of all this she killed her mother, and she put the poison tablets around in the rooms this afternoon, and she's—why, she's a homicidal maniac or something terrible like that!"

"I'll say she is. If those strings of fringe were tied she tied 'em."

"Or Van Antwerp."

"You know he didn't do it. He's in love with Maisie, but he had no interest in the Mercer person, man or woman. He had no motive for killing anybody. But the girl——"

"Well, what's her motive?"

"It goes back to her mother's death. Look at the probabilities there. She was in the tea house alone with her mother at the time when it is considered pretty certain the poison was administered. Maisie had plenty of that poison; she scattered it broadcast to-day."

"You don't know that."

"I know I searched those rooms yesterday and there was no sign of such tablets. And to-day, you go through the place and find them here and there. Who else could have placed them? Everybody else was at the funeral."

"But why would she kill her mother?"

"Œdipus complex. Yes, I know he's only her stepfather, but she adores him and she wants him to have what he wants, and she thinks he wants Lorna Garth so she fixes up things. Also, she's an extravagant sort, and her mother didn't give her all the money she wanted. I wormed that out of Loring, who held the purse strings. So she does in the mother. Then—don't interrupt me—I just begin to see light—then, somehow Mercer gets the goods on her—on Maisie—Mercer plans to take Carlisle off by himself and tell him so. Maisie finds this out and at the last minute, frantic and desperate in the knowledge that Mercer is going to give her away to Carlisle, Maisie bethinks herself of

the death of that dancer woman. Maybe she stands there by the car, fingering the scarf, and that puts in it her mind. She ties the fringe in the wire wheel on a chance, and it works perfectly."

"Oh, no! That child, that girl——"

"Now you know it was already in your own mind. I merely put it into words for you. If—I say if that scarf was tied in, that's how it came about."

"Then it wasn't tied in! Then Bob's mistaken, and it merely twisted itself in by accident."

"And I thought you were a detective! Going to lay down on the job at the first unpleasant bit of evidence that crops up?"

"Try the other theory. That somebody came over here while Bob was at supper and tied the fringe ends to make it look as if——"

"Well, who? Who tied it to incriminate whom? Unless it was Loring. There's an idea! I've got my eye on Loring. Also I have an idea he knows he's suspected, and he would, if guilty, try to implicate somebody else."

"There you are again. Who? Who would Loring implicate?"

"Of course he would implicate the two that stood by the car—Van Antwerp and Maisie. He wouldn't care which one was implicated so long as the suspicion was lifted from himself."

"Too far-fetched. Too vague. Though I'd like to hang it on Loring if we had any legitimate reason to do so. But motive?"

"Right there. Money. Mrs. Abercrombie left him a

big bunch. I don't know how much, but a whole lot. You see he's her first husband's relative, and she had none of her own, I believe, except her child. She left no money to her husband because he has plenty. I believe she divided up her personal belongings. But Loring is always in debt, and there is some talk about his having juggled the accounts. Say he did come here that day of the tea. You say Van Antwerp and Maisie saw him about the grounds. Say he went to the tea house and fixed up the drink, then got away just before Maisie appeared on the scene."

"Go on, what did he do then?"

"Oh, scooted back to New York, determining to vow he hadn't been to Graysands at all, and pretending that he telephoned. I've tried hard to trace that telephone call, but I can't find anybody who took his message."

"And then to-day?"

"Well, he began to think things were getting pretty hot for him, he knows we have our eye on him, and he decides to pass the buck to Van Antwerp. I can't think he meant it to look like Maisie. So he comes over here and slips into the garage, all the men are at supper, and he has a clear field. He ties the fringes on a chance. It may be noticed and it may not. Probably, he thinks, you'll poke around out there and give the car the once-over. And you'd be sure to see it. It didn't occur to him that Bob would be for cleaning up the car and sending it out again to-night."

"Oh, well, you've built up a fine house of cards. I only hope it's the real thing in the way of houses. I can tell

you I'd rather Loring would be guilty than anyone else I know of."

"Look here, Mr. Carlisle, it's none of my business, but you've too much friendliness in your system. You're like the chap—I forget his name—who wanted to be wrote down as one who loved his fellow men. Now you came here not knowing any of the Abercrombie crowd, and here you are so passionately fond of 'em you can't bear to think they're criminals though two deaths have occurred already."

"Both, perhaps, accidental," said Carlisle coolly.

"Accidental your Mayflower ancestors! Well, I'm starting for Graysands. Going over, or going to play armchair detective here?"

Downing's smile was friendly and Carlisle took no offence at his words.

Moreover, though the ex-film star was loath to believe ill of people he liked he was ready to follow up the evidence that had cropped up or had seemed to crop up.

The two started and walked briskly over to the Abercrombie house.

They found that Mercer's sister had arrived.

Carlisle met her with sympathetic words, but Downing effaced himself in the back of the room.

Miss Anne Mercer was an alert young woman and seemed to be especially interested in making sure that she was free to take all her brother's belongings away with her. She wanted to return to New York at once in her own car, and she desired to take with her the personal belongings of the late secretary.

Her businesslike manner might have made her appear callous-hearted about her brother's death, but Carlisle read her well enough to know that was merely her unwillingness to display her grief before strangers.

"I'm sorry, Miss Mercer," Downing put in, after he had listened a few moments, "but I'll have to superintend the packing of your brother's things."

"Of course you will," said Maisie, "or some of us must. You see, there may be things of Mother's or mine in there, and you wouldn't know it."

Miss Mercer nodded and seemed quite willing to have anyone present that cared to be, but her one idea was haste.

So she and Downing, accompanied by Maisie, went upstairs to the room that the secretary had occupied.

It was, as Carlisle had noticed, utterly without the feminine atmosphere, though all the appointments were in good taste and correct mode.

Miss Mercer rather hurriedly packed lingerie, hats, and gowns, then she flung in powders and perfumes, seeming to Maisie's observant eyes to resent her brother's masquerading.

"Poor Maude," she said, "I hated to have him do this, but he loved it, the way an actor loves doing his parts."

Downing's eyes, even more observant than Maisie's, watched Anne Mercer as she picked up a box and put it away with the rest.

"Just a minute," the detective said. his eye on Maisie, "let me see that box, please."

Willingly enough Miss Mercer handed it over, and Downing looked at the lid. In plain, clear letters it said "Bichloride of Mercury."

"Know anything about this?" he asked, looking at both the young women.

"No," said Miss Mercer. "Goodness! That's poison! What did Maude have it for?"

She showed a mild interest but no apprehension.

Maisie, however, acted quite differently.

She gave a sudden exclamation and stared at the box with wide frightened eyes,

"Oh," she cried, "oh, that's the stuff that killed Mother! Oh, did Mercer kill her?"

"Of course not!" cried Miss Anne; "what a terrible thing to say! How dare you!"

"Of course I dare! My mother was killed by somebody. Somebody who used that poison! It must have been your—your brother!"

"I think you have taken leave of your senses." And Miss Anne Mercer after a cold stare turned away from Maisie and faced the detective.

"I don't know," she told him, "anything about that box. But if it was my brother's property there's some satisfactory explanation for it. If it was not his it must have been placed here by some evil-minded person."

She glanced at Maisie as she spoke, and that usually spirited young woman seemed to shrivel up and collapse.

She fell limply into a chair, and both Downing and Miss Anne Mercer watched her, at first with curiosity and then with alarm.

"She's going to faint," Miss Mercer said, "here—wait a minute."

She picked up a jar of lavender salts from her brother's kit and held it to Maisie's nose.

"Ugh! Take that away!" cried Miss Abercrombie. "I'm not going to faint. I just had a queer turn, that's all."

"What made you have a turn?" demanded Downing, who liked to strike while the iron was hot.

"You, I guess," retorted Maisie, who was rapidly recovering her poise.

## CHAPTER XVI

### *More Mercury*

"Now, Mr. Detective," Maisie said, "you find out about that box of poison. My mother had a box like that in her own medicine cabinet not so very long ago. And I'll bet that's the same one."

"Maybe," said Downing, putting the box in his pocket. "Anyway, Mr. Mercer cannot be suspected of harming Mrs. Abercrombie. She engaged him."

"Yes," Maisie agreed. "But what's that got to do with it? She left him a legacy, and he thought he'd cash in on it at once."

Miss Mercer gave her a glance of scorn and contempt and went on with her packing.

"Now, Miss Abercrombie," Downing said, "you don't really believe Mr. Mercer did anything of the sort. You knew him well enough to know he was a fine character, whether man or woman. You know your mother wouldn't have engaged him to come to her in disguise unless she had every reason to know he was trustworthy. Why was he going out to dinner with Mr. Carlisle."

Downing thought by flinging this query at her she might blurt out the truth without stopping to think.

She did.

"He was going to tell Mr. Carlisle some evidence he had picked up or some clue he had found."

"Against whom?"

"That's what I don't know. That's what I wanted to find out. That's why I took his bag, when he—when he was picked up."

"Where is that bag?"

"It's in my room."

"Get it, then, for Miss Mercer. It's hers now."

"All right, I will."

Maisie flounced out of the room, and Downing turned to the calm-browed Miss Mercer.

"Don't let her disturb you," he said. "She is an irresponsible spoiled child."

"She doesn't disturb me," was the even-toned reply. "But I don't know about that box of poison. That disturbs me. Not that I question my brother's innocence" —she gave him a fleeting smile—"but I'm wondering if he found it somewhere, somewhere it had no right to be, and if that was the evidence he meant to tell Mr. Carlisle about."

"It is possible. But it is also possible that somebody put the box in here among his things to incriminate him. I may as well tell you, Miss Mercer, that there is some terrible force at work here."

He stopped himself just in time. For he had no intention of starting more trouble for this poor girl, already smarting under the blow of her brother's accidental death.

Let her deem it an accident, as it most likely was, at least until he had more to work on than he had this minute.

Maisie came back with the bag. Also with a different mood for herself.

"I'm sorry I spoke so rudely to you, Miss Mercer," she said with a repentant little smile. "I am very sorry I said that about your brother. I was really good friends with him, and though I supposed him to be a woman there were moments when I suspected the truth. Now, I do think he had something especial he meant to tell Mr. Carlisle to-night, but of course that can never be known. Here is the bag. It is intact, just as I received it from the chauffeur who picked it up."

"You took nothing out of it?" asked Downing gruffly.

"Not a thing. There was nothing in it of evidential value." She gave a hard, metallic little laugh and ran away.

A careful search failed to reveal anything that seemed of any importance. There was a cigarette case, a handkerchief or two, a compact, a pencil—just the usual and ordinary belongings. But in a small pocket of the bag were three business cards. One was from a photographer's studio, one a chemist's address, and the third was the announcement of a chiropodist's parlours.

This last caught Downing's attention.

"Had your brother need for a chiropodist's services?" he asked.

"Yes," said Anne Mercer. "Maude has always been bothered with corns, and he goes from one specialist to another in search of relief."

"There's some kind of tie-up between chiropody and mercury," the detective went on musingly. "Mrs. Abercrombie had a box or bottle of remedy for corns in her medicine chest. Here's a box of tablets, and I know of another. It's possible that this chiropodist here"—he looked at the card he still held—"is responsible for the amazing supply of this poison."

"'Gainst the law to prescribe or provide it," said Downing, shaking his head. "I doubt if your collection of poison boxes came from a chirop."

"You fellows who are inside the law, looking out, don't always know what's being done by those outside, looking in," said Carlisle, entering.

"What do you mean?" asked Anne Mercer, looking at Carlisle with interest.

Though not a very impressionable young woman, Miss Mercer had come to the conclusion that Kenneth Carlisle was a very attractive man. She had been somewhat prejudiced against him because he had been a film star, and she had a rooted belief that no follower of that profession could also have the brains needed for a real live detective. But she was rapidly revising her opinions, and she looked at Carlisle thoughtfully.

"I mean that though it is against the law to prescribe or provide certain drugs or medicaments, yet such things are done, and under strict seal of secrecy the forbidden drugs are given to responsible custom-

ers. I can't see any reason for Mr. Mercer having this box of tablets openly in his possession, except that it was given him by his chiropodist, in defiance of the law. This poison is much used in corn remedies, and a responsible patient can use a solution of one of these tablets with good results and no harm done. The trouble is that a supply of these things makes it possible for some evilly disposed person to get at them and use them for wrong purposes."

"Well, they seem to be scattered broadcast through this house," growled Downing. "Three of the household are known already to have had them in their possession, and Lord knows how many more!"

"The trouble is," Carlisle observed, "that the ones who have the tablets are not the ones we can suspect of wrongdoing."

"Of course not," put in Anne Mercer. "They wouldn't be. Your criminal would get the poison from some innocent owner of it. He wouldn't have it himself."

"Good point," cried Downing. "Now, as I dope it out, Mr. Mercer had discovered who had done this thing—who had collected poison from somebody else, I mean, and had used it to poison Mrs. Abercrombie. He meant to tell Mr. Carlisle about it to-night, and the real criminal discovered this and put the kibosh on it by staging the scarf murder."

"Then you think my brother was murdered?" said Anne Mercer in her calm, steady voice.

"I do, ma'am, because I am convinced that that girl

Maisie is at the bottom of all this crime and tragedy."

"Oh, I can't stand for it!" cried Carlisle. "I'd rather suspect Van Antwerp; he stood there, too."

"You can suspect anyone you wish," Downing told him, "but it's considered a good plan to have a glimmering idea of a motive. What did Van Antwerp have to gain?"

"Nothing that I know of," admitted Carlisle, "but then I don't agree that those fringes were tied. I still think Bob found them tightly twisted and, partly to make a sensation, he exaggerated the matter. No, Percy couldn't have done it if he had wanted to, for I remember seeing his hands lying on the side of the car all the time he stood there. But I won't think it of Maisie. That's too dreadful. She may be neurotic and erotic and tommy-rotic, and all those ridiculous complexes, but she never would cold-bloodedly murder her mother and then her mother's secretary."

"Wait a minute, Mr. Carlisle," Anne Mercer said gently. "Far be it from me to accuse a young girl like that, but I do want to say it isn't impossible. I have taken up psychoanalysis pretty seriously, and it is well within the possibilities that an apparently sweet and lovely young girl may have homicidal tendencies, may even kill her mother, and then, if in danger of exposure, kill the one who threatens it."

"Yes, Miss Mercer, I, too, know quite a lot about psychoanalysis, and I know that lots of the famous expounders of that science would agree with you. And I don't say it isn't true, but not in Miss Abercrombie's

case. She does adore her stepfather, but it is not an Œdipus complex; it is merely that the man is a lovable type. She felt, I think, that he was not happy with his elderly wife, and she was sorry for him, but she didn't kill her mother in order that he might be free."

"You can't state that so positively, Mr. Carlisle, unless you have some definite, practical reason for your statements. I think the wish is father to the thought in your case. I believe from what I have myself observed that Miss Abercrombie was carried away by her sympathy for her father's hard fate; that she did, in her mad impulse, poison her mother's drink; and that when my brother somehow discovered this Maisie killed him by tying the scarf into the wheels."

Both Carlisle and Downing stared at her.

Carlisle spoke first. "What makes you think that?" he asked. "Why do you think it was not an accident?"

"Because I have asked a lot of questions since I have been here. I learned that the car stood under the porte-cochère when my brother got in, that there was no wind at all, and that Maisie was fingering the fringe on the end of the scarf. I don't say she tied it, but I do say that in her frantic fear lest my brother tell the detective about her guilt she pushed the scarf over toward the wheel so that it engaged in the spokes."

"Far-fetched," said Carlisle, but Downing shook his head.

"No, not so far-fetched," said the older detective. "Miss Mercer has a sense of deduction. It's quite true there was no wind. Quite true that Mercer may have

been going to tell Carlisle something about the girl. We know he had something of importance to divulge, and it must have been in connection with the murder."

"This sort of talk leads nowhere," said Carlisle, moving restlessly about. "I'm going downstairs. I can learn no more up here."

He went off and after a little more talk the other two followed him.

Miss Mercer insisted on going back to New York that night. Her chauffeur, she said, was a skilful driver, and she was not afraid.

Hugh sat looking at her in a sort of apathy. He was overcome by this new tragedy.

At any rate, Carlisle thought, he couldn't have brought about Mercer's death by tying the scarf.

Then he realized that even if Hugh were guilty it might be that Maisie feared he was in danger of being found out and so stopped Mercer's tongue.

No! A thousand times no! That girl couldn't have done the terrible thing! He would never believe that.

If the fringes were tied, which he strongly doubted, someone did it after the death of Mercer, not before. Anybody could have run over to the Abercrombie Arms and tied those knots in order to incriminate somebody else.

Loring could have done it out of sheer deviltry. Redmayne could have done it to save Hugh from further suspicion—oh, he was getting maudlin now. Nobody did that, nobody. Bob was just making up a yarn. Well, he'd certainly find out whether Bob ate his supper first,

or cleaned the car first. That would tell something, anyway.

Maisie sat on the arm of Hugh's chair. It was a favourite position of hers. Her manner was simple and childlike, and she had laid aside that eerie cunning that had shown so plainly when she was upstairs.

"I am head of the house now," she said with a pretty air of hostess-ship, "and we'd all be very glad, Miss Mercer, if you'd stay the night here. If not, if you feel you'd really prefer to go back to the city, at least have a little supper with us first. Oughtn't she, Dad?"

"Eh? Oh, yes, yes. Do stay to supper, Miss Mercer."

Hugh was not at all bewildered or vague; it merely took him a moment to pull himself together. He was thinking of Lorna; he was always thinking of Lorna now. And his burden was that there seemed to be no more way of seeing her alone now than there had been before.

Miss Mercer agreed to wait for some supper, but Carlisle excused himself. He wanted to get back to his rooms and think. He was discovering that he was a slow thinker, but that he could not be hurried.

Downing, too, went away with him, but he turned off before Carlisle reached the inn.

The two had said almost nothing on their way from Graysands, and Downing felt, for the first time, that the great Kenneth Carlisle was not all his fancy had painted him.

Carlisle had an uncomfortable realization of this feeling on Downing's part, but he had matters of his

own to worry over, so he just gave a pleasant goodnight and strode ahead.

Reaching his rooms he was a bit surprised to find Van Antwerp there.

That imperturbable gentleman sat in Carlisle's easy chair, his feet up on another chair, reading a work of fiction.

"You needn't hurry home on my account," the visitor remarked as Carlisle came inside and closed the door.

"No, I didn't." Carlisle smiled, already feeling relieved that he had somebody to talk things over with. "What you reading?"

"A new detective story. A good one, too. But I don't think the publisher ought to put out a detective story uncut. It's too tantalizing."

As he spoke Percy went on cutting the leaves with Carlisle's paper cutter.

The book was of a thick, porous paper, and the slivers fell as the pages were separated.

"Heavens, do you cut it as you go along? I'd cut the whole book first and then enjoy it unhampered."

"Yeah. I say, Ken, how are things going over there?"

"At Graysands?"

"M—mh. Haven't you just come from there?"

"Yes, why?"

"Oh, don't be cryptic on me. I've found out something."

"Go on."

"You know Bob McCoy and his story?"

"Yes, but how do you know it?"

"I've been talking to the lad." Percy looked grave. "And he told me all he told you."

"How did you come to talk to him?"

"Because that accident business bothered me. I can't quite see how it happened."

"Didn't Bob tell you?"

"He told me about tying the fringes."

"Well, who tied 'em?"

Van Antwerp looked steadily at the other.

"Please don't mention her name, Ken," he said. "I couldn't bear it. Now you don't think she did it, you know you don't, but if those knots were tied somebody tied 'em. So it was somebody over here—after the car got back."

"Wait a minute, Van. It doesn't help any for you to leave out names. Why couldn't Maisie have wanted to kill the Mercer man?"

Percy Van Antwerp straightened up.

"Good for you, Ken. I'm glad you have the grit to take things by the handle. I believe what's been nearly killing me as I sat here is because I didn't dare put that thing into words myself."

"Then you do admit that Maisie may be a——"

"A homicidal maniac? I've got to admit it. Got to admit she may be. But not that I believe she is one. I don't. Now I came here to talk to you, to find out if you can clear her, and if not, or if you have the slightest doubt of your ability to clear her, then I want to get somebody else. Don't think, old chap, that I haven't faith in you. I have, but you've had very little experi-

ence, as you must admit. And unless you feel pretty sure of your powers in this particular case I'm ready to try someone else. I speak plainly, for I feel sure you'd rather I would."

"Oh, yes, much rather. Now see here, Perc, give me a day or two longer before you call somebody else. Downing's on the job, too, and he's no fool."

"I think he is."

"And you think I am. Well, maybe you're right. Anyhow, give me three days more. We can't go far astray in that time. And, too, I thought you were going to help me."

"How can I? You run up against Maisie or Hugh all the time. And I won't help to run them down, I can tell you."

"Not if they're guilty?"

"No, not if they're ten times guilty! And they're not, I tell you, they're not!"

"When you scream it out like that, Van, I begin to believe you think they are guilty."

Carlisle spoke calmly, and Percy turned white.

"Don't!" he gasped. "Don't say it!"

"Face it, man, face it. Suppose either or both of those two are guilty—it's bound to come out. If you merely want to hush it up——"

"I don't want that; I just want to find another criminal, the real criminal, so they can be freed of suspicion."

"What about Lorna Garth?"

"Of course, if she's in it at all, it's only as accessory. She's not a principal."

"Percy, you're an ostrich. That speech proves you think Hugh Abercrombie is the principal. You think he killed his wife."

"No, oh, no!"

"Yes, you do, and you want to conceal that belief and make me hunt for some other criminal."

"Carlisle," said Van Antwerp, "you're too discerning. I suppose I do fear, not think, Hugh might have killed Eileen, and the fear drives me crazy. Then here's this other thing on top of that. Suppose Maisie did tie those fringes—oh, of course I know she didn't, but just suppose she found out that Mercer was going to tell you some positive evidence against Hugh. You know Maisie is devoted to Hugh."

"Isn't she in love with you, Percy?"

"Oh, yes—at least I hope so. But her devotion to Hugh is of another sort. It isn't quite filial, either; you see, she rather looks on him as a god. She adores him as a superior being. Not at all the way she cares for me or for any of her suitors, as she calls the young men."

"I understand all that. What I don't understand is the idea of Hugh's killing Eileen. There's no sense in saying he'd do it in order to marry Lorna, for a man of Hugh's calibre couldn't live after he committed murder, let alone live with the girl he idolizes."

"I never thought of it that way." And Percy looked surprised. "But it's true, though. I don't believe Hugh could commit crime and then expect to be happy afterward."

"Yet you think he did it."

"No, I don't really thing that; I don't know what to think."

"I'll tell you what you think. Or rather fear. You fear that Maisie committed both murders. I know you won't own up to this, but it's the truth all the same. You can't bear to see Hugh falsely accused, but if the alternative is Maisie then that won't do, either. How about looking in another direction? How about Loring?"

"I know you've suggested that before. But what have you got to prove it?"

"Nothing at all. Say, Perc, do you ever have corns?"

"Mercy, no! Why?"

"Did you know bichloride of mercury in solution is a cure for them?"

"I did not. I never have them. What are you getting at?"

"I don't know. Probably nothing. But here's something you can do to help me if you will. Go to New York to-morrow and go to this chiropodist's parlour. Here's the address. See if Loring ever went there, and if he brought away any of that poison."

"All right, I'll go. But I wish you'd tell me more."

"No, better not know more. Just find out who from that house has ever been there. Include Hugh and Redmayne and everybody in your inquiries."

"All right, I will. But I suppose there are other chiropodists."

"Yes, but mighty few of them give out these tablets. It isn't considered good form, you see."

"I see. Well, go ahead, old chap, but do try to get a new angle on the thing. I don't believe you're quite sure yourself that it was the Abercrombie family."

"No, I don't believe I am."

Van Antwerp went away, and Carlisle settled down to his longed-for "think."

But first he picked up the house telephone and asked for Bob McCoy.

Shortly that alert young busman appeared.

"Sit down, Bob," said Carlisle cordially. "Are you good for a little information?"

"Yes, sir. I'm the knowing kind."

"Uppity, eh?"

"No, sir, not a bit. But what I knows, I knows."

"That's a good thing. Now, Bob, when you came in to-night, did you clean your car first or eat your supper first?"

"I et my supper first. I was turrible hungry."

"But you said, or rather you gave me to understand, that you cleaned the car first?"

"Onintentional, sir, I do assure you. I wasn't long aeatin' and then I polished off the car. Not a reg'lar cleanin'—I do that to-morrow mornin'."

"I see. Now once again about the tied fringe. Why are you so sure it was tied and not merely twisted?"

"Law sakes, Mr. Carlisle, don't I know a knot when I see one? Can't I tell when a string is tied around a wire and when it's just tangled round?"

"No, not after it has whirled round on the wheel times enough to be all snarled up."

"Maybe that's so." Bob looked very thoughtful. "Yessir, I suppose it might be so, sir."

"Well, that's all I want. Keep an open mind. It might be tied, and it might have become just tightly twisted."

"Yessir."

"And you left the car and went in to supper?"

"I did, sir."

"And somebody might have come along and seeing those strings of fringe might have tied them round the wires?"

"Yessir."

"Did you see anybody round the garage that didn't belong there?"

"Yessir."

"Who was it?"

"Mr. Loring, sir."

"Oh, it was. Well, good-night, Bob. You may go. And keep your mouth shut."

"Yessir."

## CHAPTER XVII

### *The Absence of Clues*

CARLISLE spent most of the night wrestling with his problems.

He didn't mind the loss of sleep, but he did mind the fact that he couldn't get a satisfactory equation out of the whole matter.

He was convinced that whoever killed Eileen—always with the proviso that she was killed—also killed Maude Mercer, the same proviso being observed.

But if it was Hugh who killed Eileen he certainly never killed Mercer. Why should he? If he had done it before Eileen died, because she had set a spy on him and Lorna, that would be one thing. But Hugh seemed to have no animosity toward Mercer, and besides Hugh was nowhere about when Mercer met his death.

No, that was an accident, and Bob's story was poppycock.

However, he would settle it up once for all in his mind.

If Mercer was murdered then there were four people within touch at the time. First, he would take Van Antwerp.

But try as he would he could think of no reason for Percy's killing the secretary. The two scarcely knew one

another, and as he remembered the scene Van Antwerp had had eyes only for Maisie when they stood by the car.

But wait a minute! Suppose Percy knew that Mercer had damning evidence against Maisie and was so afraid to have it told to Carlisle that he put Mercer out of the way rather than have Maisie accused!

But like all his other theories that was too far-fetched. It could be the solution, of course, but it was really easier to imagine Maisie tying those fringes in the wheel than to picture Percy doing such a thing. And he didn't believe they had been tied, anyhow.

Moreover, Percy had been so anxious to get at the truth. So anxious to fire Carlisle and get some other detective. Not likely, then, that Van had himself committed any wrong.

Well, he had three days left, and if he wasn't where he wanted to be by that time he would step down and Percy could get any old detective he liked!

Toward morning the harassed sleuth managed to get a few hours of sleep, and when he woke he was full of determination and new resolve.

"Got to get busy," he told himself as he dressed. "Better hunt clues. Or, what is better, to my mind, absence of clues. I've one fixed idea: that is, that Friend Murderer, whoever he—or she—is, is a mighty clever proposition. He isn't going to drop clues or leave evidence behind him. This may be the diabolical cunning of a true homicidal maniac, or it may be the careful cleverness of a wise and thoughtful criminal. Now I

flatter myself I am clue-conscious, and so I am, but I've got to be also conscious of absent clues, of missing clues that are purposely non-existent. Anybody can deduce from clues; only a smarty can deduce from clues that aren't there. Now, here," he picked a white sliver of paper from the floor and then another, "here are the visible and material clues that prove Van's presence in this room last night. He was cutting that book, *The Mediterranean Murder*, and he shed slivers of paper all about. That's the A B C of clues. But if he had carefully removed those slivers before I saw them then I should deduce he didn't want me to know he had that book here. As a matter of fact, he spoke of the book and growled about its unopened leaves. But my principle is right, and I'm going to find out the answer to my problem by the clues that never were left. And I'm going to start at the beginning, that is to say, at that tea-house place. That's where the trouble began, and I shall camp out there till I finish it, or until it finishes me."

All of which soliloquy goes to prove that Mr. Kenneth Carlisle was visionary, illogical, and not much more than half-witted.

He met Van Antwerp at breakfast and greeted him blithely.

"Don't engage my substitute quite yet, old man," he advised. "I'm going to get somewhere to-day."

"So? And where are you going to get?"

"Over to the tea house first of all."

"With a purpose?"

"Yes. You see, that tea house is, to my mind, like the

corner of Forty-second Street and Broadway. They say if you stand there long enough everybody you ever knew will pass you."

"Ken, old boy, I do wish you'd take this thing seriously."

"Lordy, I am! I never was more serious in my life."

"And you expect to find evidence in the tea house?"

"Absence of evidence, which is a far better thing."

Van Antwerp looked at him as at a hopeless case.

Carlisle went on:

"You're reading a detective story, aren't you? That *Mediterranean Murder?*"

"Yes, I've nearly finished it. It's a bully yarn."

"Well, does the detective deduce from clues?"

"You bet he does!"

"That somebody dropped around?"

"Er—yes. A letter and a cigarette stub and——"

"Oh, I know. And a handkerchief and a cuff link and a glove! Now you know in real life people don't go round shedding their belongings so obligingly. And, moreover, if they're criminals they're extra careful not to drop anything. Get what I mean?"

"Oh, I suppose I get what you think you mean. But it's awful rubbish. Give it up, Ken. Go back to the silver screen; be once more the Flappers' Idol. You'll never make good as a detective; you're too wild-eyed in your brain."

"Good! You've hit it. I am wild-eyed in my brain, and those wild eyes of mine are just beginning to see straight. Now, desist from your flattery and tell me

this: Are you going to New York on that little errand I asked of you?"

"I'm going to New York, and I'll do your errand."

"But you're not going on purpose to favour me. Oh, Percy, my perfect Percy, how you do tear my heart-strings!"

Van Antwerp coloured at the use of the name he detested, but Carlisle seemed not to notice. He had a bit of the tease in his make-up and to his mind the name was not a misfit.

The two started off together—Percy to walk to the railway station and Carlisle taking his way to the tea house.

As a precaution he stopped at the police station for the key.

"Yes," said Downing, "we've got that key, but you can't find so much as a burnt match over there by way of evidence."

"All been swept and garnished?" asked Carlisle, disappointed.

"No. On the contrary, nothing has been touched since Mrs. Abercrombie was taken home. Oh, the servants cleared away the dishes and glasses and all that, but the place hasn't been swept or dusted. You see, it hadn't been up to the day she died, and then we locked it up."

"Funny it wasn't cleaned all those three or four days she was ill."

"Well, it wasn't. She was ill, and I suppose nobody

ordered any cleaning done. And it was a week-end, and other work to be done, and all that."

"Well, I'll drop in there for a look-see. By the way, Van Antwerp is mad at me. Says if I don't produce results he'll suit himself with another detective."

Downing smiled.

"I didn't know Mr. Van Antwerp had so much sense," he observed. "I daresay you've noticed yourself that you haven't gotten anywhere."

"I'd rather never be a detective than to use the word 'gotten'!" And Carlisle stalked away with a real enjoyment of Downing's embarrassed looks.

It was with feelings a little ruffled that Carlisle entered the tea house.

He was dimly conscious of a sense of getting nowhere, and he resolved that such a state of things must come to an end.

He had now all the data that he could get.

To be sure, he expected Percy to bring him word of the chiropodist's findings, and he knew Downing would look into the agency matter, and he had sent Bob McCoy on an errand, but in the main he was satisfied with his knowledge of facts as far as such could be ascertained.

The rest of the work depended on his own ingenuity and cleverness.

So he went into the tea house, sat down in the chair in which, as he had been told, Eileen was sitting when Maisie came to her, and looked about him.

Suddenly he sat up straight and stared.

"Well," he remarked aloud. "Well!"

Then he communed silently with himself.

"It's too bad," his thoughts ran, "when I'm so anxious to avoid dropped clues, when I'm such a stickler for the absent clue, to see those things lying there on the floor staring me in the face! I've a notion to ignore them, not to pick them up at all, for they can't be really indicative—it's too absurd! Well, of course, I'll pick 'em up, but if these lead to Eileen Abercrombie's murderer I'll—well, I'll own up that material clues are the proper caper, after all. And maybe it's all for the best. Maybe these will give me a start in the right direction—pray heaven not!—and I can find absence of clues that will corroborate these."

Diligently our erratic detective searched the room. The waste basket claimed his eager attention. But it was empty save for a wilted flower, a small chrysanthemum it was, and a twisted bit of paper.

This paper, scrutinized, was merely a list of a few railroad trains, evidently copied from a timetable, trains leaving the little village of Crescent Cove in the late afternoon. Any of the guests might have thrown that there. Carlisle smoothed it out and put it away in his notebook.

Then he scanned the ashtrays.

These were productive of little. Apparently they had been emptied often during the afternoon, and at the last of the party only a few ashes and stubs had accumulated.

"I do hate tobacco-ash clues," our fastidious detective

mused, "I'd throw up the case if I found a Trichinopoly—not that I know what it is. Well, here are two or three of Eileen's monogrammed remnants, one of Maisie's, and two plain ones, which may have been left by anybody.

"None of Hugh's, none of—— Well, all I want is the absence of them, and I find that! Good. Now, suppose I set up a man of straw—Dummy, I shall call him, and the pronoun must do for both sexes. Here I find on the floor a present clue that points straight to him. Good. There are none of his cigarette stubs, though I've proved he was here. There are no bits of evidence in the scrap basket. I don't know why there should be, but there aren't. He left none of his belongings, not even—not anything. If he did he collected it later. He left no fingerprints, or if he did they're of no value, since he must have been a guest of the party, if not of the house, and everybody's fingerprints are all over everything. He left the absence of the glass that held the poisoned drink; that proves that he knew his victim would drink it and then set down the glass, which would be collected and washed by the servants—and it was. Now, if my Dummy is not a man it is Maisie. If it is a man, who is it? That's where we stand. That's what I have to find out. Now to set about it."

With another long, comprehensive scrutiny of the room, the reception room of the tea house, Carlisle slowly went out, locked the door, and pocketed the key.

Then he strolled along to the house of Abercrombie.

"I'm certainly clue-conscious," he told himself with

real pride. "And that's all a detective need be. Now here's our proposition. If Maisie is my Dummy there need have been no one else in the tea house with Eileen after the last guests said good-bye. If my Dummy is not Maisie then Maisie and Dummy were both there after the last guests left. Point: Did Maisie know Dummy was there, granting Dummy is not Maisie? Answer to that, no. Or she would tell. That is, unless Dummy is Hugh. And it isn't, because——" Here he tapped his breast pocket with a satisfied air, for he could not entirely lay aside his actor manners.

Reaching the house, he went around to a rear door.

The man who admitted him regarded him curiously but merely turned him over to Fetter.

That worthy looked with disapproval at the unconventional entrance and invited Carlisle to go to the lounge.

"No, Fetter," he said. "A few questions first."

"Very good, sir," returned the butler, looking like an illustration for Walt Whitman's "Me Imperturbe."

"First, I want to get a line on the extra waiters you had here the day of the tea."

"They have been questioned, Mr. Carlisle, and none of them took a telephone message from Mr. Loring."

Carlisle wanted to say, "Is that so?" in his slangiest tone, but checked the impulse. He wasn't one to jolly a servant.

"Where did the outside help come from?"

"From the Roadside Inn. They sometimes oblige us."

"Can you give me the names of those who were here?"

"We have one still with us. I daresay he can tell you all the names."

"Call him right here, please, Fetter."

And in another moment Carlisle was confronted by a waiter he had once seen in the inn dining room.

"Your name?"

"Hermann."

"Well, Hermann, where were you about five or six o'clock the afternoon of the tea party?"

"In the lounge of this house, sir, looking after any guests who chanced to come inside."

"Did many come?"

"Quite a few, sir."

"Were you expected to answer the telephone?"

"Mostly, sir. But sometimes the gentlemen would answer it."

"Was there any call that a gentleman answered long about quarter to five?"

"It's hard to be sure, now, sir. But I think there was."

"Who was the gentleman?"

"That I don't know, sir. I know only Mr. Abercrombie over here."

"And it wasn't Mr. Abercrombie?"

"No, not the man I mean."

"Did you hear what he said? You must report on this; it's all right to tell tales."

"There seemed to be no secrecy, sir. I don't know anything about it, except the gentleman said: 'From New York? Who is speaking?' Then he only said, 'Yes,'

and 'All right,' and 'I'll tell her,' or something like that."

"I see. Was anyone else about?"

"I don't think so. Nearly everybody had gone home. The tea was about over."

"And what did this gentleman do next?"

"That's what struck me as odd, sir. He went to a vase of flowers that was on the table, and he out with his pocket knife and cut off a pink rosebud, a beautiful flower it was, and then he went away."

"Have you seen him about since? Why are you here now?"

"I'm here obliging because a few of the house servants gave notice after——"

"After the two tragedies?"

"Yes, sir. So Fetter called me over."

"And have you seen the gentleman you told me of since?"

The man looked perplexed.

"I don't know, sir. I didn't look at him special, and I can't justly say."

"Did he make a memorandum?" Carlisle glanced at the pad and pencil that lay on the telephone desk.

"Yes, sir. I think he did."

"A note of trains, like a timetable?"

"Oh, no, sir, that was another man."

"Who?"

"I don't know. I didn't know anybody here. But some gentleman called the railroad station and wrote down a list of trains. That was earlier."

"And you don't know what the man who cut the rosebud wrote down?"

"No, sir."

"That's all, Hermann, you may go."

"And so," Carlisle soliloquized, "we get again the absent clue. Our Dummy did that particular bit of telephoning, our Dummy didn't leave the rosebud about, our Dummy didn't exploit his memorandum, for the train list was not his. Furthermore, if this is all straight goods our Dummy is not Maisie. Well, we can't do much more until we get word of Loring's whereabouts at that psychological moment."

"Wait a minute," Carlisle called to the departing Hermann, but he had already gone.

"Never mind," Carlisle said to the butler, "maybe you'll know. What time was all this Hermann was telling me about?"

"It must have been around half-past five—a little later if anything. I left Mrs. Abercrombie in the tea house at five-thirty, and she was then expecting Mr. Loring on a matter of important business. Two or three other guests were there, but they were just about leaving. I came over here to the house and found Hermann ready to go home. There were no guests here then."

"All right, Fetter. Then you didn't go over to the tea house again till when?"

"About six-thirty, maybe a trifle later."

"Miss Maisie wasn't there then?"

"No, sir. Mrs. Abercrombie was alone. She seemed

very ill and I ran for Corinne, her maid. Together we got the lady home and Corinne put her to bed."

"You returned to the tea house?"

"No, sir, I didn't go back there at all. I sent the under-servants over to clear up, and they were a bit careless about it, I daresay. But I had the dinner to look after and I let things go a bit."

"And when did you go over to give the place a thorough cleaning?"

"Not at all, sir. Mrs. Abercrombie was ailing and nobody wanted to use the place, so it wasn't really put in order at all. You see, the police locked it up on the Tuesday morning, and that was the day I expected to have it cleaned. It wasn't bad, you understand, all the dishes had been taken away, but it needed a going over."

"Yes, I see. Was Mr. Loring here at the tea at all?"

"I don't remember seeing him. But there was a big crowd; he may have been."

Carlisle left the solemn-faced butler and went on into the lounge in search of the family.

He found Hugh and Maisie in confab.

Half turning to go lest he interrupt them Carlisle heard his name spoken with a choking sob.

"Mr. Carlisle, don't go," Maisie implored. "Do help us."

"Of course," Carlisle said, coming nearer and trying to ignore the tension of the scene.

Abercrombie was pale and quiet but gave indications of some fearful struggle tearing at his heart.

Maisie was digging at her eyes with a foolish chiffon handkerchief and seemed to revive with a new courage as she saw sympathy and solicitude on Carlisle's face.

"What's on now?" he asked lightly, "can I do anything?"

"Do something with Dad," Maisie exploded, pounding Abercrombie's shoulder as she perched on his chair arm. "What do you think this jelly fish is planning now? He's going to confess to killing Mother to save me! Doesn't that burn you up?"

"You tell me, Mr. Abercrombie," Carlisle said pleasantly. "Is this the plan?"

"Maisie states it a bit baldly. But, seriously, Carlisle, there is a strong suspicion among the police that the child is——Oh, I can't put it into words but they seem to think——"

"I know," Carlisle said, "they have turned the fierce light of psychology on it and have diagnosed it as precocious homicidal mania."

"Yes," cried Hugh, "yes, just that! I never heard of anything so ridiculous or so terrible. But Maisie here won't do a thing but make fun of it."

"I should say not!" put in Maisie. "It's too lobsterish to think of Bobbo taking this thing seriously."

"But, Miss Abercrombie, you must take it seriously. Your father is quite right, the police—some of them, anyway—have their claws out for you, and if you persist in this attitude they will probably arrest you."

"Pooh, who's afraid? I'll hand them the run-round, and they'll be glad to get off with——"

"Please stop that sort of talk." Carlisle looked at her sternly. "You may be a silly little flapper, and you are, but if you haven't sense enough to know that you're on the brink of a very dangerous precipice it's my duty to enlighten you, and I'm going to do it. Now keep still a minute."

His manner even more than his words quelled the girl, and she began to tremble a little as he held her eyes with his own and laid the matter before her.

"You are suspected of murder," he said straightforwardly. "The police are only waiting for a little more evidence to arrest you. You are suspected of putting poison in the drink your mother took that day in the tea house. Also, you are suspected of bringing about the death of Mr. Mercer as he sat in the car."

"Mercer!" breathed Maisie in little more than a whisper. "Why—why, that was an accident! How dare you say I—I——"

She paused, silent and dazed looking. Her lovely eyes went from Carlisle to Abercrombie and back again.

"I don't accuse you of these things," Carlisle said, looking at her pityingly, "but I do say it's time you stopped acting like a troublesome child and awoke to the realities of life."

"Don't be too hard on her," Hugh said, looking harassed. "She has always been petted and spoiled. But, Carlisle, is this all so? Are they really assured of the child's guilt? I feared it, but I wasn't sure. In that case, I shall at once give myself up. I killed Eileen . . ."

"Hush, Bobbo," and Maisie seemed, all at once, to

achieve dignity and wisdom. "Thank you, Mr. Carlisle, for waking me up. I have been a silly, and I won't be such a lobster any longer. Now I can't tell you who did put that stuff in Mother's drink, for she was sipping it when I went into the tea house. But it must have been —no, I won't mention names yet, and anyhow, I mean somebody you never knew and probably never heard of. But we'll see. And as to Mercer, that's too ridiculous! How could anybody look on that as anything but an accident?"

Carlisle told her then of Bob's story of the tied fringes.

But she only exclaimed anew at the stupidity of anyone who could believe such a fairy tale.

"Impossible!" she cried. "Unless Bob did it himself! Percy and I were holding hands, and I can't think you did it, Mr. Carlisle."

"No," Carlisle said unsmilingly; "no, I didn't do it."

## CHAPTER XVIII

### *Kenneth Carlisle, Detective Extraordinary*

It's ridiculous to think of that terrible accident as murder," said Hugh, shuddering at the thought. "I remember when we first heard of that similar accident over in France somewhere. A guest, a Frenchman, who had seen it told us about it, and his tale was thrilling. I remember Percy translated as he went along, my French wasn't equal to the occasion. I never heard such a graphic recital. But to think of it as the work of a girl is too outrageous. I tell you, Carlisle, I'll confess to the murder and stand trial before Maisie shall be openly accused. I won't have such a thing happen!"

"And Miss Garth?" said Carlisle gently.

"She'd be the first one to uphold me. She feels as I do —that Maisie must not be talked of in this connection. Anything, everything must be done to prevent it. Miss Garth is a noble woman, and she believes implicitly in the innocence of both Maisie and myself. But Lorna will agree to whatever I say."

"Even to an unjust accusation of yourself?" exclaimed Carlisle, horrified.

"Even to that, if it will save Eileen's daughter. And I haven't yet said it would be an unjust accusation."

Carlisle suddenly saw a light. This strange, sensitive man was so remorseful at his own lack of love for his wife that he sought to expiate by making a martyr of himself. Carlisle wasn't sure whether Maisie was guilty or not; he wasn't sure whether Hugh believed Maisie guilty or not; but he was sure that Hugh Abercrombie wasn't guilty. Further than that he was not yet ready to say.

"Drop the more tragic side of it all for a moment," he proposed; "as a detective I haven't progressed very far yet, but I'm on my way. Give me a chance and we may swing out of this yet. Have you read that new detective story, *The Mediterranean Murder?*"

"I never read those books," said Hugh; "not that I scorn them—but they don't appeal to me."

"I lap 'em up," Maisie cried. "Yes, I've read that one. I don't know what became of my copy. It has disappeared."

"Van Antwerp has it," I said. "That is, he was reading it, and he said he borrowed it over here."

"Oh, yes, I did tell him he could take it. That's all right. I read it while I was away. Then it came with a box of new books, and I told him he could take it. I remember, that was the day of the tea."

"Did he take it then?"

"I dunno. Guess so. It was here on the table, and if he didn't scoop it up somebody else did. Anyway, it's gone."

Then Downing came with his report from the agency. It didn't amount to much in Carlisle's estimation.

The Lawton Agency, Downing said, was a first-class affair, who supplied only the best and cleverest detectives to private and confidential clients.

Mrs. Abercrombie had called in person and had asked for a reliable and diplomatic detective to live in her home, and to discover whether her husband was unduly interested in a certain woman. All names had been given in full, and Mrs. Abercrombie had said straightforwardly that she had no doubts of her husband's fidelity, but she wanted to know just how matters stood. They themselves had suggested that they send her Mr. Mercer, who made a specialty of impersonating a woman, and Mrs. Abercrombie had agreed to this as it gave her opportunities of conversing with him alone; also, she had usually employed women as her social secretaries. The agency people spoke in the highest terms of Mrs. Abercrombie and also of Mr. Mercer.

This, Carlisle thought, was merely a corroboration of what they had already known or suspected and it threw no light on any reason anyone might have had for wishing to bring about Mercer's death.

But the police were by no means sure that Mercer's death was other than an accident; those among them who did think so had little to base such a theory on.

Downing, in his own mind, was more than ever convinced that either Hugh or Maisie was the murderer of Eileen, but as to the Mercer business he retained an open mind.

Percy came home and not finding Carlisle at the Abercrombie Arms walked over to Graysands.

"Well, Mr. Detective," he said as he came upon the group, "here's your faithful sleuth hound with his garnered reports from the chiropodist de luxe, the pedicure in the grand manner. You ought to see his place! Like a Louis XIVth salon. It's worth having a corn to go there to get it removed. Such luxury, so sort of Arabian Nights' Dream of Pedicurism."

"What did your elaborate friend say about his clients?" asked Ives, who was in a hurry.

"He said he numbered among his most valued patients Mrs. Hugh Abercrombie, also Mr. Eric Redmayne, also Mr. Murgatroyd Loring. I asked about a Miss Mercer, but he had never heard of her. And that's the sum total of my findings."

"We found those tablets in Mr. Mercer's room," Downing put in, but Carlisle interrupted him, saying it was time to go to luncheon and he must go at once.

But he agreed to return about five that afternoon and said that at that time he might have a report for them and he might not.

He said that he had been, at Mr. Carlisle's orders, to the office of Mr. Loring in New York and had talked with the secretary who had telephoned the message to Graysands the day of the garden tea.

The message was to the effect that though Mr. Loring had hoped to attend the tea he found it impossible to leave the city because of an important conference and that he would come the next day.

McCoy brought the statement that the secretary had talked over the telephone with some man, who

had agreed to deliver the message to Mrs. Abercrombie at once. The secretary couldn't say whether the man was a servant or a gentleman. He had a quiet, low voice, and it might have been a guest or not.

Asked the hour of this conversation the secretary asserted it was ten minutes before six, as all telephone calls were recorded and filed.

"All of which proves nothing," the astute Kenneth Carlisle remarked to himself, "for Troy Loring might have ordered that message sent, and he himself might have been here on the grounds at the time."

So Carlisle waited until the others went their ways.

Maisie took Van Antwerp off for a game of tennis, saying she would go into a decline unless she took more exercise.

Bob was sent home, and Downing was about to leave.

"You going to know anything more than you do now when you come back here this afternoon, Mr. Carlisle?" he asked, a little truculently.

"Oh, yes," said Carlisle brightly.

"You sure?"

"Oh, yes—yes, indeed."

When Carlisle wanted to he could be very irritating.

"Well, you'd better," was Downing's parting shot, "'cause if you don't I've my orders not to delay things further."

"That's by way of ultimatum," said Carlisle as Downing disappeared.

Hugh Abercrombie nodded his head.

"He means he'll arrest Maisie," he returned dully. "But he shan't. I'll confess myself first."

"They won't believe you," said Carlisle.

"Won't they? In the first place, young man, I shall do it so convincingly that they can't help believing. In the second place, it will satisfy them. All they want is to arrest an Abercrombie. Which one doesn't very much matter to them. And—it is a sacrifice I owe to Eileen. I ruined her life."

"No, she ruined your life."

"Quibbles, all. I should not have loved Lorna, but I did, and that was a sin I must expiate with my life for the sake of Eileen's daughter."

Carlisle looked at the speaker curiously. If Hugh had been a neurotic sort, or even of a fanatic type, he could have understood it better. But the man looked so sane, so strong, so highly intellectual, he couldn't set him down as mentally unbalanced even in the slightest degree.

"You needn't look at me as if I were a poor pale martyr," Abercrombie said with a whimsical smile. "It isn't that at all. But I've wronged my wife; not in the literal sense of that phrase, but in a spiritual sense. Now my wife has been killed. I didn't kill her, I don't think Maisie killed her, but if Maisie is accused of it it is most certainly up to me to sacrifice myself for my wife's daughter."

"Have you any suspicion of anyone else?"

"Not the very least," said Abercrombie, looking

straight at him. "I cannot imagine anybody doing it. I still think in my innermost heart that it was somehow an accident. There seems to have been a lot of that poison distributed over this house."

"There certainly was. Now, Mr. Abercrombie, don't do any of this confession business until I come back."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to see some people. Can you tell me where they live? Their names are Robertson and Carmichael."

"Oh, yes. They're friends of Eileen's. I wonder they haven't been to see me. But they were more her friends than mine. They are all at the same place. Robertson is Mrs. Carmichael's brother. It's about three stations down the line. Grovecliff is the name of the place. You don't think they killed Eileen, do you?"

"I've no real reason to think so. But I've heard that Mrs. Carmichael is—well—not of a lovely disposition."

"Oh, I don't know. I know her very slightly. She always seemed pleasant enough, I thought. Why do you want to see her?"

Carlisle was drawing blank. He thought Hugh would protest against his seeing the Carmichaels or Robertson.

"They were in the tea house among the last ones that day."

"They were? But surely, old man, you're not letting suspicion run that way?"

"Suspicion runs where it will. Want to lend me a car?"

"Most certainly. But—oh, well, never mind."

"Suppose I tell you what's worrying you. You're just a bit afraid Mrs. Carmichael will say something unpleasant about Miss Garth."

"Now I know you're a wizard! How did you guess that?"

"I fancy the Carmichael lady is one who is inclined to censure you and Miss Garth, having little if any of the milk of human kindness in her blue-blooded veins."

"That's about the size of it, though where you picked up your notions is more than I can tell. However, I'm willing to leave in your hands the good name of both Miss Garth and myself. I say, Carlisle, as man to man, is there any hope of this thing being cleared up? Really cleared up, I mean. Maisie didn't do it unless the girl is—irresponsible. In that case, what about an analyst? Oh, don't think I'm hedging on my confession to save her, but on the other hand Lorna deserves consideration."

"Yes, indeed." And Carlisle smiled at the troubled face before him. "Now you lend me a car and give me that address and then go for a walk with Miss Garth, or something nice like that. Be back here at five and have tea ready and I'll report."

"Take any car you like from the garage. Here's the address, and do believe I appreciate your kindness and help."

Carlisle went to the garage, chose a speedy little car, and with one of the under-chauffeurs started on his way to stir up the sleeping dogs.

He had not forgotten Van Antwerp's warning about letting them lie, and he knew quite well how an un-

friendly woman's tongue might try to pervert his judgment, but he also believed that being forewarned he was forearmed.

He enjoyed his ride and was pleased at his journey's end to find the three people he wanted to see seated on their pleasant terrace.

There were no other guests and his own few words of introduction brought him an immediate welcome.

He told them frankly that he was a detective working on the Abercrombie case.

Carefully watching Mrs. Carmichael's reactions to his remarks he made himself very interesting and very charming, but he began to think Van Antwerp had been right about the lady's disapproval of the Hugh-Lorna affair.

"Well," he thought to himself, "I was warned of that attitude on her part. But now I'm here I must find anything else I can to help along my clues."

Aloud, he said:

"I have only the highest regard for each and every member of the Abercrombie family and household. I am not now considering their conduct or their possible implication in the case. But I am trying to get some definite information, which I hope you can give me."

"That's more like it!" exclaimed Mr. Carmichael, who was a bluff, hearty sort. "I don't hanker after voicing suspicions of my fellow men, 'specially when I haven't any suspicions nor no cause for any. But a statement of facts, that's another matter."

"That the way you feel about it, too?" Carlisle

asked Robertson, who sat quietly by, listening but saying little.

"Yes, just the same. People are too ready with their suspicions, I think."

"Quite often they are," quoth the detective suavely. "Well, then, just a few questions as to actualities. At what time were you three—I assume you were together—in the tea house with Mrs. Abercrombie?"

"We were there when we first arrived at the party —about half-past four."

It was Mrs. Carmichael who vouchsafed this, as the correct one to tell of the social calendar. "Then we went out around the grounds, which were beautifully fixed up, and back to say good-bye to Mrs. Abercrombie just as we were on the way to our train."

"You weren't in a motor, then?"

"Yes, we were. We were dining in New York, and our motor took us to the Crescent Cove station to catch the six o'clock train for the city."

"Yes, that's right," corroborated her husband, "and we just caught it."

"Then what time did you leave the tea house?"

"At quarter to five, I should say."

"More like ten to five," corrected Robertson; "we had none too much time."

"That's near enough," Carlisle said easily. "'Long about quarter or ten minutes to five. Who was in the tea house then besides Mrs. Abercrombie?"

"Nobody," said Mrs. Carmichael with decision. "Nobody at all."

"You left her there all alone?"

"Yes, sir, we did." Carmichael took up the tale. "She told us she expected her lawyer at six o'clock, who was to have an important conference with her. So as we had a formal dinner engagement, we came along and left her there."

"You don't think we did wrong, do you?" asked Mrs. Carmichael anxiously.

"No, oh, no, not at all. Now, tell me, did you all have drinks there?"

"I did," said Carmichael. "My wife took a drop, also, as we were starting on a journey. Robertson, here, had a nip, but Mrs. Abercrombie refused, saying she had had all she wanted for the afternoon."

"And, pardon me, but this is an important point, was there an opened bottle at your disposal?"

"No, there wasn't." Mr. Carmichael looked a little annoyed but went on steadily: "There was an empty bottle, and as Mrs. Abercrombie invited me to open a fresh one of Scotch I did so. I don't know where all their servants flew to, I am sure."

"It's merely a detail," Carlisle said placatingly. "Then you went away?"

"Just that. Said good-bye to the lady, and as our car was right there we drove straight to the station and took the train."

"And did you see anybody approaching the tea house as you left?"

"Only——" began Mrs. Carmichael, but her husband

shut her up so quickly that she bit off the next word, unsounded.

"No," he thundered, "no, we saw no one—no one at all. Did we, Rob?"

"No," obediently responded that individual, a colourless, meek man who seemed to live to do Carmichael's bidding.

"Then that's that." And Carlisle rose to go.

They urged him to say longer, but he declined any further hospitality, feeling rather relieved at thought of putting the miles between himself and these unattractive people.

But after he was in the car he leaned out and as he said his good-byes said also, "Oh, by the way, that chap that went into the tea house just after you left it, was he carrying a very beautiful rosebud?"

"There wasn't any man——" Carmichael's voice was lost as Carlisle's car rolled away.

But little Robertson stood with blinking eyes and his mouth slightly open, and Mrs. Carmichael stared and clutched at her breast, nodding involuntarily.

Carlisle chuckled as he went on toward Crescent Cove.

He had all he wanted now. The links were complete; his absent clues all fitted into place.

At Graysands he found everybody on the big porch waiting for him.

The place looked very peaceful and attractive. Fetter was just bringing tea wagons, and Maisie, sitting be-

tween her stepfather and Van Antwerp, was quiet and rather subdued.

Downing, in the background, stared at Carlisle as if he would wrest from him any reason why Maisie Abercrombie should not be arrested that moment, but he didn't wrest anything.

Eric Redmayne was nervous. He shuffled his feet and folded and unfolded his arms like a man who has reached the end of his rope.

Glancing at him, Carlisle couldn't quite make out whether he was nervous lest Hugh be arrested, or whether the man had some other anxiety.

Murgatroyd Loring was like a stone statue. Carlisle thought he had never seen a living countenance so motionless. Whatever that man had on his mind was closely hid from observation.

Carlisle took a big porch chair, and in his most sociable way demanded tea before he could talk at all.

Maisie, doing the honours, poured his tea and offered him crumpets and cakes.

But he refused food, drinking two cups of tea and then signifying his readiness to talk.

"I was asked here," he said in his low cultured voice, "by the police to investigate the death of Mrs. Abercrombie. As an accessory tragedy came the death of Mr. Maude Mercer. These two deaths I now pronounce to be two wilful murders committed by one and the same person. It is exceedingly painful to me to divulge the name of this criminal but it must be done. I am not justified in withholding it another moment, for

until it is known innocent persons are being held under suspicion. Van Antwerp, my one-time friend, why did you do this thing?"

Carlisle's gaze as he looked at Percy was full of an agonized regret and a deep sorrow.

There was a moment's silence as the truth sank in to the listening intelligences.

Maisie was the first to speak.

"Oh, no!" she moaned, "not—not——"

"Hush, dear," said her father, putting an arm around her, "it is not entirely news to you."

Redmayne revived like a flower after a shower. He had been nearly beside himself with fear for Hugh or Maisie or both, and the relief was so great it was pain.

Loring sat and smoked without a word, his cynical countenance betraying only a scornful indifference to what was going on.

Downing, eyes and mouth both open, jumped to his feet, and saw with satisfaction that two or three of his colleagues were in readiness to help him should need arise.

But Van Antwerp put up no fight.

"So you did it, Ken," he said, and his tone showed a tinge of admiration. "I could have put it over but for you—you and your absence of clues. The moment I saw you arrive I knew it was a fight to the finish between us. And we are now at the finish. Yes, I poisoned Eileen, the beautiful Eileen, and—I may as well complete my confession—I did for Mercer. I found out he

was a man, I taxed him with it, and he told me he knew of my crime. Eileen had told him the whisky I gave her tasted queer, and Mercer had it in for me and was about to hand me over to Carlisle.

"I can't say anything to you, Maisie, or to you, Hugh—I can't even look at you—I guess I'll go now —with Downing. Good-bye, all."

Van Antwerp rose, and looking neither to right nor left let Downing grasp him by the arm and lead him away.

Hugh stared after him, then turned aside and buried his face in his hands.

In a moment he looked up, and it seemed to those who saw him that he was rejuvenated. He looked not so much happy as at peace. His face was calm and serene, his manner kindly as always but full of a gentle beneficence that gave out a sort of radiance as he spoke.

"I thank you, Mr. Carlisle, for your administration of justice. I can't quite understand it all, and I don't want to try just now. If you will all excuse me I think I'll go out for a little stroll."

"Go along, Bobbo," said Maisie, her eyes shining at him through her tears. "And tell her I love her, too, and I'll see her to-morrow."

Unheeding, Hugh walked away, his step springy and light as of a man from whom a great burden had been lifted.

"Now, tell us the story," said Downing, returning after he had given his prisoner in charge of the authorities.

"Not such a lot to tell," began Carlisle, but Maisie broke in:

"None of that, now. No 'Elemental, Holmes,' if you please. Tell us the whole works, for I've no one to amuse me now. I've lost my boy friend."

Her lip quivered with a real grief, and Eric Redmayne moved over to her father's vacated chair.

"Go on, Carlisle," he said, "tell us all you care to."

"I can't make a real story of it," protested Carlisle, "but here's what happened. And the whole thing would have been wound up long ago but that Percy was so clever. For instance, the first thing I wanted to do was to interview the Carmichaels and Mr. Robertson, who were known to be among the last to see Mrs. Abercrombie. Well, Perc told me that the Carmichaels were down on Hugh and Lorna and that they were catty about Maisie, too, and he said not to stir them up on the subject as they'd only make unkind remarks. He said let sleeping dogs lie, and I did. Gosh, if I'd made straight for them first! Well, then, I caught on to a few falsehoods that Van told me. He said he saw Loring here on the grounds the day of the tea. Said Maisie saw him, too. Well, they didn't, as we know, but I believed him. And, of course, that sidetracked me. Then, in the tea house, I saw him pick up and secrete a cigarette holder. It was his own, but it took me some time to realize that he took it so it wouldn't be there to incriminate him. I saw him take it, but when I spoke of it he said he was putting up a joke on me, and I swallowed that. Oh, I admit I was gullible, but we were old schoolfellows, and I

always liked him and believed in him. As to the poison, it seemed as if everybody had some of that or had a chance of getting some or having some planted on him, so I worked on other lines.

"Then came the Mercer affair. I had sized up Miss Mercer as a man, and I was going to tell him so. I felt sure he was all right—somehow he inspired confidence. Also, I think he had something to tell me, something that condemned Percy, and Perc just couldn't let him tell me. So he killed him. He told me he had never heard of the dancer who was killed that way and I believed him, but Hugh told me only to-day that Percy did know about that and heard it at first hand. So added to Bob's declaration that the fringes were tied to the spokes I knew Percy must have done that; it was too absurd to suspect Maisie. The absence of clues at the tea house proved to me that Percy was there at the critical moment. It was he that took the telephone message from Loring's office. He wrote it down and went to the tea house to tell Eileen. He found her there alone, and pouring her a highball he put in the poison, which he doubtless had with him all the time awaiting his chance. You see, he went into the tea house just after the Carmichaels left it, and they saw him. That was why he didn't want me to stir up those sleeping dogs lest they bring in his name."

"But why, why, did he do it at all?" asked Maisie, her eyes big with horror.

"Because your mother wouldn't let him marry you. He told me that. And he wanted not only you—forgive

me—but also the fortune that would come to you at your mother's death."

"Go on with your absence of clues," growled Downing.

"Oh, yes. Well, it seems that when Percy went to the tea house he carried with him an exquisite rosebud, the kind Eileen preferred to all others. Did he leave it there afterward? He did not. He saw to it that it went away with him. I rather think he expected Mrs. Abercrombie would die then and there. But she never told anything about it at all except to say to Mercer—Corinne overheard her—that the whisky Mr. Van Antwerp fixed for her tasted queer. So he left no clues to his presence if she had died at once. His cigarette holder he did leave but retrieved at the first opportunity. The memorandum of Loring's message he brought away with him, too. He left none of his own monogrammed cigarette stubs. No this and no that—oh, he was very careful, but he did leave one thing. One positive bit of incriminating evidence that set me on the right track.

"When he was in my room, one night he had a new book that he had brought from here to read. It was, or had been, unopened and the leaves had to be cut. He growled about this and cut some while in my room. When he went away he left white-paper shreds on the floor. Well, on the floor of the tea house I found a few shreds of that same paper. He had carried that book from here that day, as I know. He had stopped at the tea house, and some slivers had fallen; it is one of those soft papers that shred all over. Then when I saw those

white flakes on the floor of the tea house and matched them up to the ones from that book I knew where I was at.

"Well, that's about all. I've carefully checked up the time. The Carmichaels left at five-forty or forty-five. Percy arrived at about ten to six. He mixed the highballs, probably one for himself, too, and poisoned the one he gave Eileen. Then he went away at about six-fifteen or six-ten, for he was back on the porch at the Abercrombie Arms at six-thirty to keep a date. Maisie came along about six-thirty and found her mother finishing the highball. She thought nothing of it, and soon after Eileen had a sick spell and the servants took care of her."

"Good boy," exclaimed Downing. "I thought you were looney, Carlisle, but I take it all back. Howsomever, not everybody can deduce from clues that ain't there."

"That's what makes me mad. My deductions from the absence of clues pleases me. But, after all, I got my biggest push from the clue that was there, the shreds of paper. You'd be surprised to notice how those things drop off from a book that has been opened with a paper cutter. Anyway, next time I'm going to do all my deducing from clues that are entirely absent."

"I think that ragged-edged book gave away the case," Eric Redmayne put in judicially. "I know how those long, thin slivers of paper drop around and stick to your clothing, too. Seldom enough a book of fiction is issued unopened."

"Yes, but I'd have nailed him anyway," protested Carlisle, jealous for his own methods. "Not one of his cigarette ends, no trace of his memo or the flower he took with him. You see, he got the telephone message by chance and started to carry it to Eileen. Then, on impulse, he took her a flower which he knew to be her favourite. But when he reached her and found her alone he realized that his moment had arrived. His confession will tell you that he wanted to marry Maisie, and both her father and mother had forbidden it. He could only win his suit by putting Eileen out of the way, for he felt he could persuade Mr. Abercrombie later.

"Then Mercer discovered something and was about to tell me. This shows how easily one can be unobservant. I could have sworn I saw Percy's hands on the door of the car all the time we were standing there under the porte-cochère. But he disengaged his hands long enough to tie those strong fringes round the wire wheel, and if that wasn't a fiendish gesture I never knew of one! The Carmichaels refused to say that they saw Percy approaching the tea house as they came away from it, but I trapped them by mentioning the rosebud, and their faces gave them away. As to the poison, Percy got it from the chiropodist or in some other underhanded way. He carried it round with him, awaiting his opportunity to administer it. Thus he committed a casual crime, the hardest of all kinds to discover."

"What a terrible man!" said Maisie, her awestruck little face white with horror at these revelations. "How can a human being be so fiendish?"

"Put it down to psychical causes," said Carlisle gravely. "I won't talk of criminal impulses or murder fixations, but I will say I agree with William Watson who writes:

> Time and the ocean and some fostering star
> In high cabal have made us what we are.

"Don't try to understand that, Maisie, just feel glad and thankful that both you and your father are freed from the machinations of a wicked soul."

THE END

*Whether you were keen enough to solve this Crime Club mystery in its early stages, or whether the author succeeded in keeping you in suspense up to the last chapter, Mastermind requests that you add to the next reader's enjoyment by remembering that—*

CRIME CLUB READERS
NEVER TELL

# THE CRIME CLUB brings to you

The Crime Club *Selected Book*, chosen for you every month by a famous jury of writers and critics, will come to you automatically on the first day of every month for one year. As soon as your enrollment is received, the Crime Club will forward you the following items:

1. The current Crime Club novel
2. The Crime Club Annual (*free*)
3. Membership Certificate (*free*)

You pay only the bookstore price of the book sent you—it is the identical book you could buy in the bookstores if you waited two weeks instead of having it sent to you in advance of publication.

## THE CRIME CLUB ANNUAL

Free to Crime Club members—unobtainable by non-members—is the Crime Club Annual, DRAMATIC CRIMES OF 1927, A Study in Mystery and Detection. This remarkable book, in make-up and appearance and quality similar in every detail to the average expensive non-fiction volume, contains the results of keen research into that extraordinary succession of mysteries and murders which took place in the crime wave's most desperate year.

*MAIL THIS COUPON TODAY!*

MASTERMIND,
THE CRIME CLUB, INC.,
GARDEN CITY, N. Y.

Please give me further information about THE CRIME CLUB, and tell me how I can become a member.

Name_____

Address_____

City_____ State_____

*My bookseller is*_____

# *The most exciting moment in the year!*

## When the first Crime Club mystery knocks at your very door..

¶ You have been expecting that knock all day—you were warned. It is the first day of the month and the Crime Club never fails. ¶ The moment passes. Quiet footsteps move away. Yet your excitement does not abate. In your hand you hold a scarlet package bound with black tape. What is its secret? ¶ In an instant you are plunged headlong into mystery! Hours or days later, when you put the contents of the scarlet box aside, finished, you have adventured. You have been thrilled, terrified. You have followed the most skillful, scientific criminals, the most dastardly murderers, the most modern outlaws from crime to retribution. You have traveled with and followed the thoughts of the greatest detectives in all the twisty torturous fields of mystery fiction. And you know a secret Crime Club members never tell. ¶ Men like Woodrow Wilson, Premier Baldwin of England, Theodore Roosevelt, Herbert Hoover, have all stated that mysteries were their great recreation. Powers in the financial world, the social world, the world of art, are the people who demanded the Crime Club—who caused the Crime Club actually to be created. ¶ The most thrilling mystery or detective novel the Crime Club can find—that is the new adventure offered you every month by this unique organization. It may be the newest by Edgar Wallace, the latest exploit of Sherlock Holmes, a new baffler from the pen of Mary Roberts Rinehart. These and many others—the best mystery novelists of the world—are Crime Club authors. They are writing for you. ¶ When the Crime Club points its finger, it chooses the best new novel out of the entire Crime Club list to send to you. A jury of famous critics and authors makes the selection. They are hard to satisfy and their choice is a guarantee of thrills.

**TWO WEEKS IN ADVANCE OF PUBLICATION**
**you receive this book**

## How to join THE CRIME CLUB

*See the back flap of this jacket*